The UNCERTAIN GLORY

by HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH

To Jimmy
From Raleigh
and Isabelle

THE UNCERTAIN GLORY

Stories by

HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH

Pollyanna of the Orange Blossoms (Trade Mark) **$2.00**

Pollyanna's Jewels (Trade Mark) **$2.00**

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"I THOUGHT PERHAPS YOU DIDN'T WANT ME ANY LONGER."

(See page 304)

THE UNCERTAIN GLORY

BY

HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH

Author of "Pollyanna of the Orange Blossoms," "Pollyanna's Jewels," "The Girls of Friendly Terrace," "Peggy Raymond's Way," Etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY

H. WESTON TAYLOR

L. C. PAGE & COMPANY

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"O, how this spring of love
resembleth
The uncertain glory of an
April day!"

Two Gentlemen of Verona

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THE UNCERTAIN GLORY

CHAPTER I

ON THE TRAIN

The first call to luncheon had been fervidly welcomed in the Pullman. While the intense heat was not conducive to appetite, and hours of inaction rendered hunger out of the question, the summons of the white-aproned, ebon-skinned envoy of Epicurus produced an anticipatory ripple. Apparently the traveling public preferred acute indigestion to being bored.

Armitage, looking incredibly cool in his grey suit, and by some miracle, still immaculate after a forenoon of dusty travel, laid down his magazine, and turned inquiringly toward his mother. Mrs. Armitage, who was approaching fifty and two hundred simultaneously—the latter numeral standing for pounds avoirdupois—negatived his unspoken suggestion by a slow shake of her head.

"Hadn't you better have a little something?"

the son persisted. "Say a sandwich and a glass of iced tea?"

"Heavens no, Ross. I'm only too thankful when duty and inclination coincide. I ought never to eat luncheon and today I can't. Run along."

The young man rose, shook himself slightly, thereby obliterating every suggestion of a wrinkle, and having set his panama at the prescribed angle, saunteringly obeyed the spirit if not the letter of his mother's injunction. He was not hungry but like his fellows he thought of food and drink as satisfactory devices for passing the time when there was nothing better to do.

Between the Pullman in front and the diner at the rear of the train, intervened a number of day coaches, in sultry summer weather the last word in the discomfort of travel. Armitage entering the first, felt the impulse of recoil which was his instinctive reaction against dirt and ugliness. Every window in the car was open, and blended with the rank odor of perspiration and the smell of stale fruit, was the stench of coal gas. The aisle was strewn with sand that crunched under his tread. The moist faces of the travelers were grimy with cinders. Most of the men had removed their coats and collars,

presenting to the coldly critical regard of young Armitage an unedifying spectacle of gross misery.

Almost as if a cool breeze had freshened the fetid atmosphere, Armitage became aware of a girlish figure at the further end of the coach. She sat erect, avoiding contact with the faded, cinder-blackened upholstery. Yet her posture did not suggest discontent so much as expectancy. In some vague fashion she reminded him of a bird, poised for flight. Every line of the alert body proclaimed zest for adventure. He was half afraid to look at her as he passed, for fear a closer inspection would contradict the testimony of her virginal slenderness, and reveal the too ardent responsiveness, repugnant to the sex of which hunters are made.

What he saw was oddly reassuring. In his inarticulate masculine fashion he was aware of the short-comings of the cheap, shabby dress, but the nearer view of the girl herself brought him again an impression of something refreshing. She had removed her hat, which was fortunate, for this showed her heavy, dead-black hair, parted in the middle and drawn back plainly from the delicate oval of her face. She was pale and rather thin, but neither quality suggested delicacy. Instead he received the impres-

sion of intense vitality, of strength in reserve. She was looking straight before her, not, it was clear, engrossed by the suspenders of the fat traveling man in the next seat, but as if her ardent eyes saw scenes of beauty invisible to the grosser senses. Armitage's scrutiny must have been more pronounced than he realized, for as he came abreast of her, she half turned, and her fearless eyes flashed up at him. Armitage looked away hastily, thrilled nevertheless, by that exchange of glances.

In the dining car he easily forgot the vivid personality of his unknown fellow traveler in favor of lamb chops and green peas. His leisurely meal would have been enjoyable, except that across the table sat a pimply individual whose noisome interest in the food he had partially masticated roused Armitage to a resentment hardly less than murderous. His determination to ignore the offensive animal was frustrated by his morbid curiosity as to what the fellow was going to do next, and he was continually finding out at the expense of his appetite.

When the hovering waiter offered him a menu card, as a tacit invitation to order dessert, he shook his head. But he might have gratified his youthful craving for sweets undisturbed, for

as he paid his reckoning the man opposite did the same. They rose simultaneously and Armitage left the diner in the wake of the object of his aversion.

In his slow progress along the dirty aisles of the swaying train, the thoughts of the young man ran ahead to the girl who had impressed him as the embodiment of eager life. As he entered the coach she occupied, his eyes strained toward her seat. The train had made one stop during his meal, and he was apprehensive that her place might be empty. But it was not empty, and Armitage stopped abruptly, with a sensation approaching physical nausea. Apparently his had not been the only observant eyes. The man he had mentally anathematized throughout the luncheon, now wearing a smile unimpaired by the rakish tilt of his toothpick, was just seating himself at the girl's side. He stretched his arm along the back of the seat, and crossed his legs, revealing socks of startling brilliancy. Then his nasal voice, pitched to the note of playful gallantry, made itself audible. "You goin' far?"

The girl turned instantly, giving Armitage the benefit of a profile eminently satisfactory, even though he was somewhat exacting in the matter of profiles. A voice clear and unagitated, an-

swered the question with another. "Are you going to sit here?"

"Thought maybe I would. Thought you looked kind o' lonesome." The smile became so open that the toothpick improved the opportunity to escape, and was lost in the miscellaneous litter covering the floor.

"Then I'm going as far as another seat."

The girl was on her feet, snatching at hat and jacket, and reaching up to the rack overhead for the ungainly bundle wrapped in brown paper, her sole substitute for a traveling bag. As she crowded past her temporary seat-mate, Armitage addressed her: "May I help you with your package?"

She eyed him hard and for a tense moment he anticipated a rebuff as vehement as that which had temporarily wilted his *vis-à-vis* of the dining-car. But apparently her excitement had not impaired her power of discrimination. Almost to Armitage's surprise she yielded to him her pathetic traveling equipment and moved lightly to a seat near the front of the coach. Armitage placed her bundle on the rack overhead, lifted his hat as she thanked him, and went on.

He resumed his seat in the Pullman wearing an expression that challenged his mother's curi-

"'MAY I HELP YOU WITH YOUR PACKAGE?'"

osity. "It must have been a wonderful luncheon," she mocked.

"Hardly that; just fair."

"You look positively radiant."

"I saw something just now that amused me." Armitage described the encounter between Beauty and the Beast with due regard for dramatic values. His mother listened with unconcealed sympathy.

"Shameful rather than amusing," was her verdict. "A self-respecting girl should be protected against such experiences."

"She impressed me as perfectly able to look out for herself." Armitage wore a reminiscent smile.

"Is she pretty, Ross?"

The son answered with a discretion beyond his years. "I don't know. At least her face is interesting."

"Bring her in here," Mrs. Armitage ordered impulsively. "I imagine she's some unsophisticated country girl, and it's a pity for her to get the idea that the world is made up of odious people. We'll look after her while she's on the train."

Armitage did not move. "I'm afraid she might be suspicious of my motives," he ex-

plained. "I've seen her give one fellow a calling down, and I'm not anxious to have her try her hand on me."

"Then I'll go myself. But you must come with me to point her out."

Armitage's conviction that his mother would recognize the heroine of his story at a glance proved well founded, for without even looking to him for confirmation, she went straight to the seat occupied by the shabby little traveler. He noted with interest that the girl showed no hesitancy regarding the invitation, and hardly seemed surprised. She followed his mother unquestioningly and he followed her, carrying her uncouth bundle, and concealing under a nonchalant air, a secret excitement over this unexpected development.

In the sleeping-car, seated opposite the two women, he resigned himself to being ignored, and retaliated by making the best possible use of his ears and eyes. The girl began by disclaiming the need of protection. He wasn't anybody to be afraid of. That fresh sort just needed to be squelched good and proper and they'd stay squelched. She lifted luminous eyes to the gracious presence beside her. "But I'm glad to talk to you as long as you're so kind. I

want to ask somebody about a place to stay until I get work."

"You're going to the city, then?"

"Yes."

"Have you no relatives or friends there? It is a serious step for a girl of your age to go to a great city alone. Are your father and mother living?"

"Yes, they're living," replied the girl, her inflection implying a reserve which explained itself in a musing, "I suppose they *call* it life. But they don't know about me," she ended, "I'm running away."

"My dear child!" The sudden stiffening of Mrs. Armitage's figure lent emphasis to her dismayed exclamation, and the girl's voice took on a conciliatory note. "They won't be surprised. All of us run away, except the ones who die. I'm the first girl, though," she amended.

"I'm afraid you hardly realize what you are doing," remonstrated Mrs. Armitage. "Even if your home is not everything you could wish, almost any home is better than none." Her brief hesitation evidently ended in the decision that the girl's outspoken confession justified her in similar frankness. "Are your father and mother unkind to you?"

The emotion that swept the girl's face awakened in Armitage the uneasy apprehension that she was going to cry. "My mother's the salt of the earth," she said in a strangled voice. "She's done everything and borne everything a woman could. That's one reason I'm running away. When I can earn enough to send for her, it'll be the happiest day of my life."

"Then your father is cruel?"

The girl's reflective pause impressed Armitage as indicating a judicial quality of mind not always considered feminine.

"I don't know whether he's cruel or not. I guess you have to mean it to be cruel, don't you? A mowing machine isn't cruel because it goes ahead cutting down daisies and clover and grass, and leaving just stubble behind it. Well—that's father. If he really was cruel," she philosophized after a minute, "there might be a chance of his being ashamed some time. But he'll never be that, and he'll never be different."

Mrs. Armitage temporized by changing the subject. "Do you wish to go into domestic service?"

An illuminating flash of fun sparkled through the girl's air of seriousness. "Well, no. Of course it's the only thing I know how to do.

Maybe that's the reason I'd rather do something else."

"She's fed up with housework," Armitage interpreted to his mother's frowning perplexity.

The girl digested the unfamiliar slang, then smiled appreciatively. "Yes, I guess I am, but that isn't all. Whatever I do now, I'm going to get away from it as soon as I can. It'll be just a starter, and it seems as if the hardest thing in the world to live down was working as a hired girl. Don't you think so?"

Mrs. Armitage, profoundly shocked, refused to subscribe to any such heretical sentiment.

"'Tisn't always so in the country," the girl acknowledged. "A neighbor of ours worked out and she got engaged to the son of the folks she worked for, when he came home from college for his summer vacation. And the old people were pleased to death about it. But I thought maybe city folks looked at such things differently."

Armitage grinned impudently at his mother, who affected to be unaware of his existence. Unconscious of their by-play, their companion continued, "But anyway I don't want to be shut up in somebody's kitchen. I want to find out what the world's like and what people are like—and what I'm like myself."

Apparently Mrs. Armitage regarded this as hopeless. "You haven't told us your name yet," she said, as if desirous of bringing the conversation back to a safe and sane basis.

The girl's hesitation suggested to Armitage that she was planning to give a name not her own, but when it left her lips, she spoke it glibly, "Cynthia Ayres."

"How pretty!"

"Do you like it?" She showed a pleasure that seemed illogical till she explained. "The Ayres is an old story but I've just made up my mind to be Cynthia."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Father named me Keziah. There's always been a Keziah in the family, grandmothers and great-grandmothers, ever so far back, and he tacked it on to me. Keziah! And they call me Kizzie or Kiz at home." Her lips tightened grimly. "I've made up my mind to have everything beautiful that's to be had—if I can get it—and it looks like a beautiful name is just about the easiest thing to get. So from today on, I'm Cynthia Ayres."

"Good for you!" Armitage emphasized his approval by a shout of laughter, but there was ambiguity in his mother's smile. She recognized in Keziah Ayres—alias Cynthia—the spirit of

revolt against which conservatism instinctively braces itself.

Though they talked intermittently through the remaining hours of their journey, they made little progress beyond this point. Apparently Keziah Ayres had reached the end of her self-revelation, and Mrs. Armitage's impulse to proffer good advice spent itself in the resolve to seek out the representative of the Traveler's Aid, on their arrival, and turn over to her this perplexing problem. But before they parted, she gave the girl her card. "If you should meet with any unlooked-for difficulties," she said kindly, "I shall be glad to help you. We are only in town for a few days now, but after the first of October, you can reach me at this address."

The girl's brown fingers closed on the slip of cardboard, but her eyes went from the woman to the man, as if appealing from some vague injustice. "I'm not expecting anything harder than I'm used to," she answered. "I guess I won't have to trouble you."

The city in mid-afternoon was hot and oppressive, and the drive to the hotel where they were to spend a week was accomplished almost in silence. That his mother's thoughts ran parallel to his own was evident to the young man when Mrs. Armitage broke a protracted silence. "You

didn't think her pretty, Ross, but she really is something of a beauty—of the Madonna type."

"Madonna," cried the son. "Why not Mary Magdalene?"

His mother's indignation put him on the defensive. "I didn't mean that as it sounds. She's a good girl—I'd take my oath on that—but she's the sort who wants to know the flavor of life. I wonder what she'll make of herself."

That was Friday afternoon, and the following Sunday the newspapers headlined the outbreak of hostilities in Europe. The flaring up of international hostilities awakened little apprehension in the Armitage's circle. Some thought the conflict would be over in a week and others gave it three months to run its course But before the three months were up, the most stupidly optimistic knew the world was on fire.

For the next four years there was little time to think of Keziah—or Cynthia—Ayres.

CHAPTER II

THREE FRIENDS

Ross Armitage, recently Lieutenant Armitage of the American Expeditionary Forces, sat in the living room of his mother's home, soaking himself in civilization. He liked the feel of the stuffed chairs, and of the Persian rug under his feet. He enjoyed his immaculate civilian clothes, with the possible exception of his shoes, which though two sizes larger than he had been wont to wear, yet seemed of a cramping narrowness. The achievements of his mother's cook, now laying herself out to do honor to the heroic son of the house, compared most favorably with his memories of army fare.

For the first time in his life Armitage was finding himself acutely interested in the women of his acquaintance, beginning with his mother. He was positive that at the outbreak of the war he had been an unlicked cub, without proper appreciation even of the woman who had meant most to him. She had lost a good many pounds since his enlistment, which had not detracted

from her good looks and her increasing greyness had impressed him as becoming. Altogether she was an adorable and beautiful mother, and he had a remorseful feeling of having just discovered her, with a resulting obligation to make up for lost time.

While this new-born appreciation began with his mother, it did not stop with her. Over night he had awakened to the fact that the young women of his circle, many of whom he had known from childhood, were an enchanting and incomparable crowd of girls. In France he had been either less fortunate or more fastidious than his comrades, for the French women he had encountered had not impressed him favorably. Occasionally he had run across an American girl, but in every case her conscientious determination to spread her fascinations thin, so as to minister to the needs of innumerable homesick doughboys, had left in his mind only a vaguely agreeable impression of breezy efficiency. The girls at home, however, were reasonably ready to devote themselves to his entertainment. He had only one fault to find, their inexplicable eagerness to discuss the war. Their interested inquiries as to life in the trenches revolted him like obscenity on innocent lips.

As he sat in after-dinner comfort, luxuriating

in the sense of physical well-being, he thought intermittently of the girl his mother wished him to marry. Before the war he had derived no little amusement from the *naivete* with which she maneuvered to bring him in contact with Anne Rossiter. Now his point of view had changed. He no longer found the idea amusing.

Anne was not a beauty and it was all the more credit to her cleverness that so few ever found it out. She had dash and sparkle as well as breeding, and a tact so alert that her popularity with men made her few enemies among her own sex. She gravitated to extremes in style, and wore them with an unconsciousness that made them seem neither bizarre nor vulgar, though inevitably attracting attention as she meant they should. Anne was one of the few women who do not exaggerate the power of beauty. She had proved it by no means omnipotent, and considered mother wit a satisfactory substitute, with the additional advantage of brightening under use, instead of fading. Meanwhile she had her own good points, of which she made the most.

Armitage was not troubled by any mawkish tendency to underestimate his own advantages, but he was also free from vainglorious conceit. He had no idea that Anne was in love with him, but he felt a reasonable certainty that she would

marry him if he set out to make her. At present he was more than half inclined to try. His new enthusiasm for the American girl somehow focused itself on Anne.

He was to see her later at a dance, and the mantel clock assured him that he had some minutes at his disposal before it was time to dress. He leaned toward the pile of magazines on the table, and took the first that offered itself. Then he saw it was a stranger. The cover, though lacking the Quakerish dignity of the Atlantic, did not show the monotonous embracing couple, by which a magazine is wont to symbolize its popular appeal. His experience in France had taught him respect for all printed matter, including advertisements, and disregarding the table of contents, he opened the magazine in the middle, reaching at the same moment toward the box of cigars.

When Mrs. Armitage entered the room five minutes later, the cigar in Ross' fingers had not been lighted, and his air of luxurious languor had been replaced by alertness. Her intuition placed the responsibility for the change on his choice of reading matter, and she said rather apologetically, "I haven't any idea what that magazine is like. I think it was a sample copy."

He looked at her with unmistakable excite-

ment. "Have you read a poem here, 'Three Friends'?"

"I haven't looked inside."

"Then sit down and I'll read it to you."

Mrs. Armitage, still on the defensive, complied, and with an inexplicable emotion evident in his voice, Ross began.

"Three friends, Love and Youth and I,
Tramped the world together.
Over us a cloudless sky;
Jocund breezes blowing by,
Sweet with thyme and heather.
Morning brought the linnet's song;
Night the camp-fire's embers.
By each path, or short or long,
Joys the heart remembers."

"I noticed a little poem in last month's Century," Mrs. Armitage was beginning, when Ross looked up from his reading, his glance charged with such poignant reproach, that she subsided bewildered, and did not again interrupt him.

"Youth forsook his friends one day.
Truant Love sped after.
Desolate I make my way
Through a somber world and grey,
Bare of song and laughter.
Fainting in the sultry heat,
Fearful in the gloaming,
Lonely and with aching feet,
I must forth be roaming.

"Distant, evanescent gleams
Keep my heart from breaking;
Shining of a hope that seems
Fashioned from forgotten dreams,
Truer than awaking.
In some mystic By and By,
On some footpath ferny,
Three friends, Love and Youth and I,
Shall resume our journey."

Mrs. Armitage looked hard at her son. She was aware that the young men of the present day read verse, though seldom of the sort to which she had just listened. The new poetry, scoffing at rhyme and rhythm, had always impressed her as placing undue reliance on certain virilities for the use of which she had washed out Ross' mouth with soap and water, not so many years before. In its reading she frequently had the sensation of undergoing a series of electric shocks, and she was haunted by fragments of a modern poem in which the memories of a dead love were realistically compared to sea-sickness. It never came into her mind without a recurrence of the nausea attendant on its first perusal. "Three Friends," she felt sure, would have appealed to her majesty, Queen Victoria.

"Very pretty," pronounced Mrs. Armitage, vaguely realizing that Ross was waiting for her verdict.

His eyes were brilliant as he smiled at her. "Who do you think wrote it?"

"Someone I know?" The son's excitement was reflected in the mother's mood as vague uneasiness.

"You've met her."

"O, well— Really, Ross, I haven't the faintest idea."

"Cynthia Ayres."

"Cynthia Ayres!" Her face was blank and her voice mystified.

"Why, you must remember her, the girl on the train, the girl who was running away. And her name wasn't Cynthia at all, but some infernal thing out of the Bible, no, not Deborah—Keziah! That's it, Keziah."

"I believe I do have a faint recollection of some such person."

This admission seemed to stir Ross to illogical irritation. "I can't imagine half remembering her, or forgetting her either, except as a result of shell shock. She was one of the most vivid personalities I've ever run across."

Mrs. Armitage laughed indulgently. "A middle-aged woman may be excused for overlooking something perfectly apparent to a keen-eyed young man. But it is hardly likely that your poetess is your railway acquaintance."

"Why not?"

"With all due apologies, I recall Cynthia Ayres as a rather uncouth young person."

"She wasn't that. She was undeveloped. But that was four years ago, nearer five."

"I hardly think five years would bring her to the point of writing magazine verse."

Ross did not reply at once. "Perhaps you're right," he admitted after a reflective silence. "But the name isn't common."

"No. And yet not especially uncommon. I remember one embarrassing experience when your father was in Europe and a perfectly impossible Mr. Ross Armitage registered at the hotel where I had expected to spend the summer. Everyone was so sure we were an estranged husband and wife, and I finally stopped explaining, and simply ran away. And yet we never think of our name as a common one." Her glance wandered to the clock. "Isn't it time for you to dress, dear?"

"O, I suppose so." His manner lacked its characteristic zest. He had lost interest in the dance, and for the reason that another personality had temporarily eclipsed Anne's piquant charm. The thin, ardent face of his acquaintance of an hour came before him as distinctly as if he had seen it only yesterday. He recalled

the grey eyes, luminous and eager, staring into the future, the restless pose of the slender figure, leaning forward as if impatient to meet life more than half way. And then he remembered that four years and over had passed since he had seen her, and he wondered pityingly how her adventure had fared.

"Yes," he repeated getting to his feet. "I suppose it's time to dress," and to explain the regret in his voice he added, "I'm so comfortable here that I hate like the devil to move. If I'm not careful, I'll be getting fat." It was not till some time later that his mother looking for the magazine containing Cynthia Ayres' verses, found he had taken it with him.

The dance proved enjoyable after all. Anne in a cerise gown, expressing the daring mode in its most audacious terms, was the outstanding figure in the dazzling throng, and Armitage was not superior to the satisfaction of receiving marks of distinguished favor from the young woman who was a magnet for all eyes. But though it was nearly morning when he reached home, he sat down at his desk and wrote a few hurried lines.

"My dear Miss Ayres:

"I have just finished reading your poem, 'Three Friends,' in the current number of Wood-

ward's Magazine. If the name Cynthia was bestowed on you by your god-parents, this note is an intrusion for which I must apologize. But if it is an *alias* for Keziah, I venture to claim the honor of your acquaintance. You may perhaps remember your conversation with my mother and myself on a hot and dusty railway journey, when we asked you to sit with us to escape an annoying admirer. The war followed so closely that I lost sight of everything but the one thing that mattered. Now, if by a lucky chance, I have re-discovered you, it would give me the greatest pleasure to renew our brief acquaintance. Won't you let me know where to find you and allow me to call, if you are still in the city.

"Very truly yours,

"Ross Armitage."

He lit a cigar and pondered as he smoked. Very possibly his mother was right. "Three Friends" did not sound like the Cynthia Ayres he had met that far-off summer day. Probably the verses were written by some sentimental old maid, whose lover had jilted her and who comforted her sore heart with dreams of a future where youth and love were eternal. The explanation seemed so plausible that he experienced a feeling of discomfort as he fancied his somewhat exuberant letter perused by his imaginary spinster. Then he shrugged his shoulders and reached for his pen.

"Oh, well," he comforted himself, "if she's the wrong one, there's no harm done." He dashed off the address in a hurry, for fear he would change his mind.

"Miss Cynthia Ayres,
Care of Woodward's Magazine
New York City."

This duty done, he stretched himself luxuriously, yawned and went to bed.

CHAPTER III

AFTER MANY DAYS

Armitage had decided to subscribe for Woodward's Magazine; its promptness deserved recognition. Four days from the time he mailed the letter, consigned to its care, the answer was in his hands. He had glanced indifferently over his letters that morning when the maid brought up the mail, and then an unfamiliar chirography, flashing out of the unexciting pile, had challenged his attention. Instinctively he knew its source.

Armitage attempted to forestall disappointment by the reflection that the writer was possibly the sentimental spinster of his fancy, but the instant he opened her communication, he knew better. The handwriting was somewhat whimsical, with unexpected quirks and funny little wriggles, a hand still unformed, though far from crude. His feeling of anticipation strengthened as he read.

"My dear Mr. Armitage:

"I am beginning to think rather well of 'Three Friends'. To begin with, the editor of Woodward's paid me five dollars for it, and while that is not a munificent sum, line for line it compares very favorably with what I am told Mr. John Milton received for Paradise Lost. The five dollars paid the monthly installment on my second-hand typewriter, but welcome as that lift was, it seems I owe it more. If 'Three Friends' has—or should I say have—recalled me to two friends I very well remember, that service far outweighs the other. I have never forgotten your beautiful mother's kindness on that eventful journey.

"I am busy through the day as I have a stenographer's position with Owen and Wescott. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday I attend classes at the evening High School, and I have a season ticket for a course of lectures on Friday. But Thursday and Saturday I am generally home after dinner, and I shall be glad to see you any time you find it convenient to call. And my landlady, Mrs. Gilmour, will also be glad, for she is a kind soul and my unfriended state sometimes moves her almost to tears.

"Sincerely yours,

"Cynthia (K.) Ayres."

Armitage consulted his desk calendar. Tuesday! And the hour was ten. At a rough calculation something like fifty-eight hours must elapse before it would be possible for him to re-

new the acquaintance he had come so near forgetting completely. Fifty-eight hours seemed to Armitage a long time. He felt a trifle aggrieved that Cynthia Ayres had put such emphasis on her engagements at night school and the lecture course, especially the lecture course. He could not help feeling that despite the friendly tone of her letter, she undervalued the pleasure of seeing him again, else why this insistence on a lecture ticket?

Moodily Armitage regarded the letter lying open on his desk. There was something about the tail of her y's that made him think of the twinkle in an eye. The letter seemed laughing at him, and quite illogically he came to the conclusion that he had made a fool of himself. The whole affair struck him as juvenile, and he had the abhorrence natural to the man of twenty-five winters for any line of conduct which might suggest youth. When a mere boy he had made the acquaintance of a chance fellow traveler, who to susceptible twenty-one had seemed singularly appealing. But in the years since, he had achieved manhood. From the standpoint of maturity it was evident that Cynthia Ayres would be the better for a little wholesome neglect. Apparently the fact that she had sold some mediocre verses to a less than mediocre

magazine had turned her head. The more he thought of it, the more her reference to her season ticket indicated her indifference to the renewal of their brief acquaintance.

The maid came to say that someone wished to speak to him on the phone. It proved to be Anne, with a plan for an automobile ride of a hundred miles or so, with a dinner dance at the end. Armitage's comments seemed favorable till he put the inquiry, "Tomorrow, did you say?"

"No, Thursday."

"Oh—Sorry, but I have an engagement for Thursday."

"Sorry—See you tonight at the Blanchard's, I suppose." Anne rang off leaving Armitage surprised at his own vacillation. After having reached the conclusion that Cynthia's case called for neglect, he was nevertheless making all arrangements to see her at the earliest possible opportunity. He felt ruffled and inclined to be suspicious of his own motives, yet obscurely glad, withal, that he had not accepted Anne's invitation for Thursday.

He found Cynthia's address without difficulty, a street of boarding houses, drearily monotonous and dingily respectable. A dowdy servant, her apron damp with dish water, took his card with an air of doing something unfamiliar, and showed

him into the stuffy box dignified in Mrs. Gilmour's boarding house by the title "reception room." Originally long and narrow, it had sacrificed over half its length to the dining room, and now seemed even smaller than it was, because it was crowded with furniture much too large. The mantel too, was cluttered with figures in china and bronze, a variety of vases, and two clocks, both equally useless, as neither was running. Apparently the collection dated from the period when Mrs. Gilmour did not keep a boarding house, and in its present arrangement suggested the bric-a-brac section of a rummage sale. Among the pictures hung so closely as to suggest the intention of concealing the worn wall paper, the sombre "Burial of Latané" caught Armitage's attention, and gave him the assurance that Mrs. Gilmour's birthplace had been somewhere south of Mason and Dixon's line. The cramped, ill-cared-for room seemed as unfitting a place to renew a friendship as a railway coach had been for its beginning. But Armitage found ground for congratulation in the fact that at least, it was unoccupied. The hour of his call, half past eight, was sufficiently late to give opportunity for the younger and more frivolous element of the boarding house contin-

gent to scatter in search of amusement, and he was spared the scrutiny of their curious eyes.

Cynthia Ayres did not keep him waiting. He heard someone running lightly down two flights of stairs and knew it was not the sloppy servant who scuffed as she walked. The light step crossed the hall and a girl stood in the doorway. As he rose to his feet, his heart leaped exultantly. His sense of relief was overwhelming.

Cynthia Ayres had improved her time. He was confident that no one, not even his mother, could call her uncouth. Her blue serge, plain to the point of severity, left the attention free for the girl herself. The erect, slender figure, the vivid, eager face with its frame of black hair, and its wide grey eyes, made the doubts and hesitations of the last three days puerile, contemptible. He went forward to greet her, amazed at his own pleasure.

Her eyes searched his face as she gave him her hand. "I might as well own up first as last. You don't look a bit as I thought you did. I never should have known you."

"And I'd have known you anywhere. You look just as you did only more so."

Laughingly she led the way to the fat sofa, standing primly against the wall. "If we sit

here," she said, "we have the street noises to contend with, and at the other end of the room, the rattle of dishes. I prefer the street." As she seated herself, she shot at him a glance provocatively mischievous, and yet somehow quite removed from coquetry. "I can hardly believe you're really here."

He felt himself put on the defensive. "I should have been here long ago, in normal times. But you remember it was only a few days—"

"Oh, I know, I know." She hastened to set him right. "The war wiped out everything. But beside that—well, you and your mother were more like characters out of a book than real people, you know, and every year you grew more unreal than the year before, till now it's like having a call from David Copperfield."

"I *had* to come to life when there was a chance of making the acquaintance of a poet."

To his surprise she flushed. "Are you laughing at me?"

"Laughing? Of course I'm not laughing. Why should you say that?"

"I know I'm not a poet—my poor little verses! And you must know it better than I do."

"I have mighty few acquaintances whose verses appear in the magazines, and the few I

have, I brag about. Aren't you honestly proud of yourself?"

"Proud? I don't think so. I was awfully excited when the first were accepted. I couldn't really make myself believe it till I saw them in print. It's queer, seeing a thing in print that's been part of yourself. It must be like a mother's seeing her little child for the first time."

"Then this isn't your first poem? You'll have to show me the others some day. If you always have as strenuous a program as that you outlined in your letter, I don't know when you find time for writing."

She drew a long, reminiscent breath. "O, it's always been a strenuous program. I've had to earn my living, of course, and that's been a handicap. I started as a waitress in a cheap restaurant. You know your mother suggested—"

"Yes, I remember," Armitage interrupted, and blushed for his mother's lack of discrimination.

"I don't know as the restaurant was much better. The work was hard and the hours long. But I started the very first week on my course in stenography. And then I discovered the public library." She looked at him with illumined eyes. "It's a tragedy to love reading in a home like mine. I've read scraps of old news-

papers, just as a starving child would gnaw a mouldy crust. And then to have thousands and thousands of books waiting to be read, waiting till you have the time. I've grudged every minute I've slept for the last four years," she ended and sighed again.

He was curious to know more of the struggles she passed over so lightly, and artfully led her on to talk. She had graduated from the restaurant, it appeared, in six months, securing a stenographic position, in spite of the lacks she frankly admitted. "But everything was on my side. Work was plenty and the small concerns had a hard time getting stenographers for what they could pay. They were willing to put up with my blunders, and of course I was learning all the time." She checked herself impatiently. "Why are we talking of nothing but me, when you've had such wonderful experiences? You were across, weren't you?"

Armitage made haste to explain that his experiences on the other side were not of a sort to furnish conversational topics. Her eyes burned into his while he was speaking, and he fancied that he read in their depths understanding, as if she too, had lived through scenes, the memory of which seared like hell fire. To relieve the tension they talked of books, or rather

she talked, and he listened to the outpouring of her enthusiasm with a blending of sympathy and amusement. She had read without any directing knowledge of standards, a queer hodge-podge of old and new. It was odd to talk with one who had just discovered Vanity Fair, and who brought to it the same freshness of judgment that she gave to the last of the best sellers. There were gaps in her knowledge, far less surprising on the whole, than her achievements. If at times he was tempted to assume the role of mentor, again he was humbled as he recognized the intuitive quality of her judgment, a humility intensified by her unmistakable deference to his verdicts.

He prolonged his call to an unconventional length. Young people who had been out in search of entertainment, returned, glanced inquiringly into the reception room, and finding it occupied, stood in the hall to conclude their farewells, conversing in whispers punctuated with giggles. It was perhaps the return of these pleasure-seekers that suggested to Armitage the question that he put abruptly, following her uncompromising statement of her opinion of Bernard Shaw.

"But don't you ever have any fun, you poor kid?"

She looked at him blankly, then straightened herself with a quick flush that emphasized her habitual pallor.

"Fun? Why, it's all fun. You didn't imagine I was pitying myself?"

"But you're working all the time, day and night. You need recreation."

"Recreation? Why, that's exactly what it is. I've been re-created in the last four years. When I think of my mother—"

He realized that she had left her sentence unfinished because the tears were choking her. "Oh, yes, your mother," he said sympathetically. "I remember that you wanted to have her with you."

She found her handkerchief and wiped her eyes. "Six months ago, I thought I could do it. You see there's a little sister, fourteen years old. In these days it's a good deal to support three people."

Armitage who had never yet supported himself, agreed with her.

"Last year I got a raise and I saw my way clear. I shall never be so happy again." She sat looking down at her hands, very quiet except for her trembling. "I didn't dare write her about my plans for fear father would get the letter, so I wrote a neighbor and asked him to see her

and tell her everything. I promised to send the money for their railway fares the first of the month. And then she wrote back—that she was going to have another child."

Armitage was not sure whether this was old-fashioned simplicity or an up-to-date scorn of the conventional, but in either case her frankness left him unembarrassed, perhaps because for the time she seemed hardly aware of his presence. He muttered some commonplace of sympathy, and she stared past him, fighting her tears.

"Life's not fair. When I think of myself, and then of my mother, it doesn't seem as if we both could be human. We seem to belong to a different order."

Armitage thought of Anne Rossiter. Life did indeed seem unfair.

Cynthia's wet eyes were suddenly ablaze. "But I'll do it yet, I will. I'll take them away from him, the new baby and all. I'll make up to mother for these cruel years, these hideous years. I'll make her forget them. I'm making a hundred and ten now, and I'm saving every penny I can spare. It won't be long."

Her eyes plead with him to agree with her, and he did it all but convincingly, and then he looked at his watch and rose automatically. It

was late enough for an immediate departure, but nevertheless he lingered to settle one important point.

"I have some books I'd like to bring you, books that have especially interested me, you know. Am I likely to find you in next Thursday?"

"I shall be here Thursday," she replied. She did not give him her hand as she said goodnight, only a quaintly formal nod. But as he looked down into her eyes, he found himself dazzled, as if by opalescent flame.

CHAPTER IV

A BELATED CONFIDENCE

When Mrs. Gilmour's boarders began to refer to Armitage as "Miss Ayres' young man" the assumption was entirely gratuitous. Armitage himself would have been dumbfounded to learn that his weekly call was regarded as an amatory adventure, and Cynthia Ayres when the girl across the hall made a jesting allusion to her "beau," flamed into as passionate a defense as if the young man referred to had been accused of crime. Yet without any definite decision to that effect, Thursday had come to be reserved on Armitage's program, dedicated to Cynthia, and through all the teeming gaities of the week, he was vaguely conscious of looking forward to those hours with her as the thoughts of a tired man reach out to a day of rest.

The intimate tone of their first talk together did not prove the characteristic note of their growing friendship. From Cynthia's standpoint, the world was so full of a number of things that it was a pity to waste too much time on person-

alities. Armitage fell into the way of bringing her some of the most talked-of books, less perhaps, because he had enjoyed them, than because he was curious to test her reactions to their message. He was aware that the temptation to affect supposedly superior tastes appeals most strongly to the ambitious, and it was a relief to satisfy himself that Cynthia's opinions were definitely her own, and that for all her deferential attitude toward his wider knowledge, she was prepared to defend doggedly her own judgment.

Needless to say, they did not talk altogether of books. Indeed their conversational range was almost ludicrously wide. They discussed the ouija board and the proposed League of Nations, country life and modern dancing, socialism and rag time. As a result of their considerations of the last-named topic Armitage introduced an innovation into the rather monotonous progress of their acquaintance by asking her to accompany him to a concert the following week. Though it was too late in the season for symphony concerts, music lovers were not as yet thrown back on the tender mercies of the musical comedy, and Armitage had noticed a forth-coming program that promised a treat to the discriminating.

Her manner of receiving the invitation puzzled

him. She looked up with an eagerness almost pathetic, and then blushed painfully. Among the accomplishments of the modern girl, the art of blushing is seldom included. Armitage found a novel fascination in watching the successive waves of color dying her forehead, and in their ebb, turning her white throat to rose color. But his purely aesthetic enjoyment was soon submerged by philosophic wonder. Why in the name of heaven should she blush.

Cynthia did not long leave him in doubt. "Of course I'd love to go, but—"

"But what?" he encouraged her kindly, though he wondered if the question of chaperonage was troubling her, a guess wide of the mark, for while Cynthia's vocabulary included the word chaperon, she classified it along with Mikado and lady-in-waiting, words perfectly intelligible, but infinitely removed from her own sphere. Her reason for hesitation was quite different and perfectly simple.

"I—well, the truth is I've only got one dress."

"One dress?"

"This dress," Cynthia particularized defiantly. "This blue serge. Everywhere I go, I wear it, and when it gets too shabby I buy another and send it home for mother to make over for my little sister Susan."

"For all-around wear," Armitage pronounced oracularly, "I should say that nothing could be better than blue serge."

"Of course, but the other girls in the office have different dresses for different times, dinner dresses, party dresses and dresses for church. I'm the only one who wears the same dress everywhere. Would I look very queer if I wore this to a concert?"

"If you look as you do tonight," the young man assured her gaily, "you won't have any occasion to worry."

"I shouldn't like," Cynthia floundered and swallowed visibly, "I shouldn't like to make you feel ashamed." The hand nearest him was trembling. His own hand went toward it, moved by a generous impulse to reassure and console. Then it stopped and dived into Armitage's trousers pocket, where it gripped a key-ring in place of the unsteady fingers that had been its objective.

"There's no danger of that," said Armitage with a propriety that impressed him as almost prim. He wondered a little at his own scruples. Had the hand been Anne's, he would have patted it without a qualm and very possibly kissed it as he said, "Brace up, old dear, and don't talk nonsense."

But Anne undoubtedly could take care of herself. She knew just what value to put upon such casual endearments. And while Cynthia would doubtless have the advantage if it came to holding her own against sheer brutality, she was defenceless against the more subtle assault. Accordingly Armitage played with his key-ring and damned his doubt with the shame-facedness of the modern youth who knows himself more chivalrous than his kind.

The concert, considered strictly as a concert, was not altogether a success for either. Cynthia's thoughts were distracted by many things, the dress of the women, the conspicuousness of their seats, and the fact of appearing in public for the first time with this extremely good looking and well dressed young man. And Armitage was too much absorbed in watching her response to the music, to give the numbers more than a casual attention.

Though he was perfectly aware that Cynthia had not enjoyed herself, he was somewhat surprised to have her tell him so, for as yet he had thought of her uncompromising frankness merely as a sporadic manifestation. Her desperate air when he inquired casually how she liked the music, made him think of a creature trapped, but even then he was hardly prepared for the

tragic intensity of her question, "Is that the kind of music I ought to like?"

"Some of the best of the modern composers were represented."

"Did you like it?"

"Oh, yes, I'm very fond of Debussy and Bach."

"It's terrible," said Cynthia in a stifled voice, "the things I don't know. It's like standing by a high wall without a gate. You know there's a garden inside, and other people are having a lovely time there, but you can't get in.

He smiled at the tragedy of her tone. "But there is a gate," he said, "even if you don't see it at first, and you are one of the sort who is sure to find it."

She sighed so heavily that he continued his condolences. "The only people there's no hope for are the ones who sniff at what they don't understand, and seem to think you're a liar if you say you like it."

"But tonight," protested Cynthia, almost tearfully, "some of that music was just noise to me, almost as bad as when the orchestra is tuning up. When I heard the people clapping, I couldn't believe it. I might as well have been tone deaf." She paused, evidently awaiting some expression of surprise or disgust, and then

continued dejectedly, "When I ran away from home I made up my mind I was going to have all the beautiful things in the world. I don't mean fine clothes, especially, but books and pictures and music and things like that. I didn't know then that everything beautiful has a wall around it."

"You're in too much of a hurry." He was smiling as he chided her. "And anyway, I've an idea you see more beauty than the rest of us. Poets do, don't they?"

"Poets!" Her intonation indicated disdain of his compliment. "If you say that again, I shall feel sure you're laughing at me."

"I'm not, however. And speaking of walls, do you remember the walls of Jericho?"

"In the Bible? Of course."

"Not necessarily. I do, because I had a pious grandmother who assumed the responsibility for that part of my training. They looked solid, you remember, but the Israelites marched around and around, blowing their trumpets, and then without any warning the walls fell flat. It's a pretty good illustration of what will happen to you. For a time you'll feel on the outside of things, and then all at once, you will find there isn't any barrier at all."

She gave a little choked laugh. "And I'll go up and take the city."

"Exactly!" He looked down into her illumined face, and the impulse to kiss it came upon him with all but irresistible force. Cynthia felt his recoil as he caught himself back. "What is it?" she asked, her frightened gaze sweeping a circle about her.

"Just happened to think of something that had slipped my mind. My memory's getting rotten."

"I didn't know you ever forgot. I'm glad, for it seems to me I forget more than I remember." Her serene acceptance of his excuse relieved his mind, as far as Cynthia was concerned, though he was still vaguely uneasy. He escorted her to Mrs. Gilmour's respectable door and having said goodnight, decided to walk home, thus giving himself leisure for self examination.

Was there any danger of his falling in love with Cynthia? It annoyed him not to be able to give a prompt negative to the question, but as he possessed the rare ability to be frank with himself, he did not laugh the apprehension aside, as he would gladly have done. He had no desire to fall in love with Cynthia. She was not in the least his idea of a fit wife for himself.

Anne came much nearer realizing the specifications. And being discreet by habit, and chivalrous by instinct, the only alternative to marriage in his thought, was to keep away from the girl, provided he found there was danger of his making a fool of himself.

As he strolled on past rows of dark and silent dwellings, he strove to consider the question dispassionately. It by no means followed that he was in love with Cynthia because he had felt like kissing her. One always felt like kissing them, if they were sweet enough, or pretty enough, or audacious enough. Beside in the case of Cynthia, the impulse had been more pitying than passionate. Had he kissed her, it would have been the sort of caress one bestows on a grieved child, a big-brother kiss, in short, impeccable in its motive, but capable of conveying an entirely wrong impression. It would never do to begin kissing Cynthia.

Introspection set his mind at rest. He was interested in Cynthia. It was inevitable that he should respond to her beauty. He admired her pluck. He sympathized whole-heartedly with her attitude of claiming as her right life's very best. He enjoyed the freshness of her point of view. But had he been ever so little in love with her, he was convinced, he could

never have spent whole evenings trying to demonstrate to her scornful incredulity the superiority of Shaw and Ibsen. While an intimate friendship between any man and woman must necessarily possess a spicy element of danger, Armitage assured himself that so far, he had not crossed the line of safety.

One fact proved difficult of explanation. Since the evening months before, when he had read to his mother the poem, "Three Friends," he had never spoken to her of Cynthia Ayres. His silence, he realized, was open to misconstruction. He had made a secret of a simple thing with the result that no one would believe it as simple as it really was. Armitage resolved to do what obviously should have been done in the beginning, tell his mother of his re-discovery of Cynthia. It would be difficult to make her understand his delay, especially as he did not understand it himself, but further postponement would only render the final explanation more difficult.

For all the sincerity of his resolve, Armitage was somewhat dashed to find his mother in the living room when he reached home. He had counted on leaving his confession till morning. A faint aroma of reproach, emanating from Mrs.

Armitage's manner, did not tend to render his mood communicative.

"I'm sorry you did not get to the Bazar, Ross. I thought you were coming in late."

"I meant to. I forgot all about it."

Mrs. Armitage's fine eyebrows elevated themselves in a manner indicating that the apology left something to be desired. But she only said pleasantly, "You should have seen Anne's dance. It was quite the sensation of the evening."

"It would be, of course. Anne is always the sensation of the occasion."

"Dudley Leveaux hardly left her a moment," Mrs. Armitage volunteered. "He was wonderfully improved by army life, wasn't he, Ross. Now that he's filled out, he's startlingly handsome."

The son frowning slightly, refused to comment on the improvement in his acknowledged rival. Though he was perfectly aware of the motive prompting his mother's statement, he was annoyed with Anne that she should allow herself to be made conspicuous by the attentions of another man. And in order to convince himself that he was above this dog-in-the-manger jealousy, he said lightly, "If anyone could make a man of Leveaux, Anne could." Then he added,

"Very likely she'll give her dance again, and I'll make a point of seeing her. Tonight I was introducing our little railway acquaintance, Cynthia Ayres, to the delights of classical music."

"Cynthia Ayres?"

"Yes. She did write those verses. You remember my reading them, don't you? 'Three Friends,' she called them."

"Remarkable!" Mrs. Armitage had rallied surprisingly. "And a few years ago she could hardly speak grammatically. She must be naturally very clever."

"She is." As the mother waxed enthusiastic, the son grew wary.

"And is she presentable, Ross?"

"Quite so." He felt the blood burning in his ears, mocking his efforts to be nonchalant.

"I might give a tea for her, just a few you know. I suppose she'd overlook my not calling."

"I hardly think she's up on the conventions," said Armitage coldly. "But in planning any social affairs, you mustn't forget she is a working girl."

"Factory?"

"Oh, damn it, no! A stenographer."

Again Mrs. Armitage raised her eyebrows,

and this time displeasure maintained the elevation.

"Really Ross, camp manners may be all very well in camp, but here—"

"I beg your pardon, mother. It slipped out before I thought." His blush emphasized his apology and Mrs. Armitage's changed manner indicated it was accepted.

"I suppose Miss Ayres is at liberty Saturday afternoons and Sundays."

"I suppose so."

"If you think she's shy in a crowd, I could ask Anne to run in. Anne is so—adaptable."

"It wouldn't be necessary for Anne to condescend to Miss Ayres," said Armitage, his pride getting the better of his discretion. "She's more than Anne's equal in beauty and brains."

"How impatient you are tonight, Ross. You know Anne is the soul of tact. If Miss Ayres is sensitive, Anne is the last person to make her uncomfortable." She rose as she added, "There will be time enough to talk this over without infringing on our beauty sleep."

Ross also rising, kissed her goodnight with more than his usual demonstrativeness, a tacit apology for his gruffness and bad manners. As Mrs. Armitage left the room, she looked back

to say, "Have you seen much of her, Ross?"

"Oh, I've called a number of times." He spoke casually and with a dignity tended to check further questioning. Yet as his mother bade him goodnight, he experienced all the sensations of a ten-year-old, caught red-handed in a piece of flagrant mischief.

CHAPTER V

A SOCIAL CUP OF TEA

Mrs. Armitage did not forget over night her amiable intentions in the matter of Cynthia Ayres. Tactfully she ignored her son's mysterious secretiveness, and the elaborate explanations Ross evolved were never called for. She had a disconcerting way of introducing Cynthia into the conversation, asking a question which took Ross off his guard, and gave him the sensation of walking amid pitfalls. At the end of a week she asked for Cynthia's address.

Ross gave it with a reluctance only too obvious. Mrs. Armitage wrote it down carefully, glancing up as she finished to say, "If you are going to see her immediately, I will let you act as my messenger."

"I shan't see her for several days, not before Thursday," Armitage evaded conscientiously.

"Then I'll rely on the United States mail service. Perhaps it's just as well. Young men have been known before this to forget letters entrusted to them."

When Ross saw Cynthia on Thursday, she was full of his mother's invitation. She babbled of it joyously, expatiating on the manifold perfections of Mrs. Armitage, as evidenced in her communication, while Ross attempted by a hearty responsiveness, to conceal his vague anxiety. It seemed that Cynthia had been invited to tea at five o'clock the ensuing Saturday. The only shadow darkening her blissful anticipation was due to her uncertainty regarding her wardrobe.

"I know my hat's shabby. I'll go over it with colorite before Saturday, but even then, it won't be like a new hat."

"Oh, your hat'll be all right," Armitage assured her, with a confidence he did not altogether feel. "Is mother going to ask a crowd to meet you?"

"She said she thought I might enjoy it better if there were just one or two beside herself. She's so thoughtful, isn't she? I wish I could buy a new hat, but I've been sending mother some things she's going to need very soon and—well, I can't afford it, that's all." She put the temptation aside with obvious resolution.

"Anne's going to be there, then," Armitage reflected. He had no reason to be suspicious of his mother's good faith, or of Anne's generosity,

yet his sense of responsibility for Cynthia led him to resolve to be at home at five o'clock on Saturday. As it proved he was not permitted the credit for this clever maneuver, for Friday at breakfast, his mother said casually, "Your little protegé, Cynthia Ayres, is going to have a cup of tea with me tomorrow afternoon. Can't you arrange to be home?"

"Have you asked anyone else?"

"Only Anne. I thought the first time it would be pleasanter if we had just a cosy talk."

"Oh, much pleasanter."

"She really writes a charming letter, spontaneous and natural. It's on my writing desk if you care to see it, Ross. And tea's at five."

It was an attractive scene on which Armitage intruded the following day. The three women already had their tea, and the faint aromatic fragrance of his mother's favorite brand, blended with the scent of the early sweet peas. Cynthia, he noticed instantly, sat a little stiffly in the big arm chair, holding her tea-cup rather as if she were afraid of its overturning.

"We didn't wait for you, dear," said Mrs. Armitage. "I was afraid you might be detained. Give him his tea, please, Anne."

Anne went to the abandoned tea table, lighted the alcohol lamp under the kettle, and bantered

him vivaciously as she waited for the water to boil, and Armitage lounging in the chair next to Cynthia, found himself comparing the two girls. Anne's nose was a trifle too short and her chin too heavy, her eyes a bit too close, and her skin contrasted with Cynthia's clear pallor, looked almost sallow. And yet without doubt, she extinguished Cynthia. Her easy nonchalance made the country girl's shyness seem awkward. Her sparkle had the effect of making Cynthia appear prim. Resentfully Armitage realized that his mother had expected him to make that comparison, and reach these conclusions.

He was not surprised to find himself practically ignored. Cynthia was the centre of attraction, and alert as he was to find occasion for grievance, he was forced to admit that Anne and his mother were charming. There was no suggestion of patronage in Mrs. Armitage's manner, no hint of condescension in Anne's friendliness. Indeed when he casually mentioned a subject, presumably out of the range of Cynthia's interests, Anne snubbed him soundly.

"Don't be tiresome, Ross. What does Miss Ayres care about bridge? Do you suppose I'd play cards if I could write poems? It's all very well for ordinary folks like you and me, to waste our time, but not for people who can do really

worth-while things." She turned to Cynthia, exchanging her jesting manner for intense earnestness. "You won't think I'm a nuisance, will you, if I ask a lot of personal questions? I'm crazy to know more about the methods of you talented people. Do you work out your poems, as you'd work out a problem in mathematics, or do they just come to you, as if they had been whispered out of the air?"

Cynthia flushing, replied that as a rule her verses came to her almost in their final form. "But that 'almost' always means a great deal of work," she explained, gaining a little courage. "Sometimes there's a line that won't come right, and that will worry me day and night, till I finally get it into shape. I don't know how it would be with real poets," she added conscientiously, "whether they would work harder, or whether the things would come without any work at all."

"Perspiration or inspiration," suggested Armitage.

"Now Ross, if you're going to join in this intellectual conversation," chided Anne, "do be original. I've heard that a thousand times." She gave her attention to Cynthia with the effect of quite forgetting him. "Won't you repeat some of your poems for us, Miss Ayres?"

"Oh, I couldn't." Cynthia flushed crimson.

"Let her have another cup of tea first," said Mrs. Armitage.

"Oh, thank you, not any more."

"But you remember them, don't you?" Anne insisted. "I can't imagine one's ever forgetting a poem one had written."

Cynthia with her inconvenient honesty, owned that her memory was not at fault. "It's only—I couldn't repeat them when anyone was listening."

"Then *you* do it." Anne whirled upon Ross. "I'll wager you have a dozen of them at your tongue's end."

"What gives you that impression?"

"Just the look in your eyes."

"Then with Miss Ayres' permission." Armitage made a little bow in Cynthia's direction, thrust his hands into his pockets, and began to repeat rather rapidly:

> "A thing of beauty is a joy forever
> Its loveliness increases; it will never
> Pass into nothingness but still will keep
> A bower quiet for us—"

"Ross," expostulated Mrs. Armitage, in shocked severity.

"What is it, Mrs. Armitage?" Then Anne's

quick wit spared the older woman the necessity of replying. "Don't tell me that he is capable of imposing on my youth and ignorance."

"Why didn't you keep out?" Ross reproved his mother. "I wanted to hear Anne's congratulations to Miss Ayres on having written Keats' Endymion."

"And you really quote Keats off-hand in that fashion. Isn't he quaint, Miss Ayres? But don't be worried, Ross. Even if you did try to trick me, I'm incapable of giving you away. You see how generous I am, Miss Ayres. If it ever got around that he quoted Keats in every-day conversation as one might quote Walt Mason, he could never hold up his head again."

Cynthia's bewilderment was tinged with resentment. "Why not?" she asked bluntly.

"Oh, we don't approve of high-brows in our set. We forgive it in Mrs. Armitage, for she belongs to a generation which tolerated such things. But Ross delivered himself into my hands when he quoted Keats."

"Samson in the hands of Delilah," grinned Armitage.

"I dare say it's awful not to know these allusions, Miss Ayres. I dare say I ought to be insulted. In fact I have a glimmering recollection that Delilah was no better than she should

be. Do you think it quite fair, Ross, to call people names they don't know enough to resent?"

Before Ross could reply, the maid had entered the room noiselessly, and stood beside his chair. He looked at her inquiringly.

"I beg pardon, Mr. Armitage. There's someone at the phone asking for you."

Armitage excused himself and withdrew. An unfamiliar feminine voice answered his "Hello!" "Is this Mr. Armitage."

"Yes."

"Now do forgive me if I ask a personal question. Is this the Mr. Armitage who comes to Mrs. Gilmour's boarding house to call on Miss Ayres?"

With extreme coldness the young man admitted his identity.

"Oh, Mr. Armitage, I'm so glad I've found you. I'm taking the Armitages as they come in the telephone book, and the two I tried first were quite disagreeable. It's lucky the name's not Johnson or something like that. Now I understood Miss Ayres to say that your mother had asked her over today for tea. Is she there now?"

"Yes."

"Well, Mr. Armitage, you can decide what it

is best to do. A telegram came for her twenty minutes ago. I wouldn't have thought anything of that, though Miss Ayres has never had a telegram since she lived in this house, and mighty few letters. But the girl who took it in, signed for it, and told the boy Miss Ayres was out. And he said, 'You better find her quick, for it's a death message.'"

"A death message," Armitage repeated, startled out of his aloofness.

"That's what the girl says. And while she's stupid enough about her work, goodness knows, it's not likely that she'd make a mistake about this. Now do you think it would be better to tell Miss Ayres to come right home, for there's bad news for her, or to call her to the phone."

Armitage thought of the boarding house, of the dinner that would be in progress when Cynthia arrived, of the comments not cruel but calloused, that would be exchanged over the rattle of knives and forks. "I'll call her to the phone," he said. A brief item on the front page of an evening paper earlier in the week, flashed before him. "Farmer Gored to Death by Vicious Bull" had been the headline. He wondered if some such tragic fate had overtaken the father Cynthia neither loved nor feared, but candidly hated.

He called her from his mother's drawing room

with no explanation beyond the fact that she was wanted at the telephone. But as he led her through the hall, he tried to prepare her for what was coming by saying very gravely, "There's a telegram at the boarding house for you."

"A telegram." She stopped short, and the catch in her breath unnerved him as if she had shrieked. "A telegram for me."

He saw that the mere name had terrified her, that the only association she had with a telegram was news of tragic import. He took her shaking hand. "Mrs. Gilmour can read it to you, if you wish. I thought you might prefer that to waiting."

"Oh yes, I mustn't wait, I can't wait." She snatched her hand from him, ran to the telephone, set in an angle in the hall, and caught up the receiver. "Yes, yes," she cried, her voice shrill with suspense. "I know. Read it."

It seemed an interminable time she stood quivering, the receiver pressed to her ear. Armitage's senses, preternaturally acute, caught the murmur of voices in the drawing room, the sound of the maid's footsteps in the dining room, as she laid the table for dinner. Against the wall where the late sunshine flickered, the newspaper head-line flashed out at him, like the handwriting at Belshazzar's feast, "Farmer Gored to

"CYNTHIA STOOD STRAIGHT AND TENSE, STILL IN THE ATTITUDE OF LISTENING."

Death by Vicious Bull." Then a jerky, unintelligible mumble came over the wire, and Cynthia broke in passionately, "Read it! Read it."

The mumble began again, stopped. Cynthia stood straight and tense, still in the attitude of listening. He waited till he could endure the suspense no longer, and then touched her shoulder. And as if some spell had been broken, the receiver dropped from her hand, her uplifted arm fell heavily, and she crumpled against him.

"Cynthia." His arms went around her swaying body. Her face lay against his shoulder colorless, the eyes half closed. But it was only a matter of seconds before the limp limbs stiffened and she stood erect.

"I must go home. My mother is dead."

"Your mother!" Armitage said aghast. His absurd insistence on the newspaper head-line had left him unprepared for this. He had felt a ridiculous certainty that the gross brute of a father whose children ran away from him as soon as they dared, had been mercifully removed from a sphere where he had been worse than a cumberer of the ground. But by some perversity of fate, it was Cynthia's mother who was dead. At the sight of the girl's twisting grey lips, Armitage's heart contracted.

He took her by the shoulders and put her into

the nearest chair. "I'll get the car," he said, "and drive you to Mrs. Gilmour's, unless it's better to go directly to the station."

She looked at him blankly. He realized that she was for the moment incapable of planning.

"Do you know when your train goes?"

"No." She followed the helpless negative with the explanation. "I knew the trains coming, I never bothered with those going back."

"I'll call the Bureau of Information," said Armitage, "Then we'll know just how much time we have." He felt himself transported to the atmosphere of the war zone, where death was all in the day's work, and was accepted like any other incident of the twenty-four hours. The stricken girl, sitting rigid except for a pulse that beat visibly in the cheek nearest him, could not be given even an hour alone with her wrung heart. At once they must talk of trains, and time-tables and packing.

He found that the train leaving at eight o'clock would bring Cynthia to the station nearest her home at six the following morning. He called the ticket office and ordered a berth reserved, then came to the silent girl and took her hand. He dreaded the sight of her tears, yet felt an uneasy certainty that she should be crying.

"I'll explain matters to my mother," said Armitage. "And the car will be here almost at once. Don't try to be too brave."

She stared at him dully, as if she did not altogether understand and he went back to the drawing room, still fragrant with the aroma of tea.

He did not realize that Cynthia's tragedy was reflected in his face till Anne broke off in the middle of a sentence at the sight of him, and sprang to her feet. She gripped the back of the chair in which she had been sitting, and faced him with such terrified prescience of disaster that for the moment he was dumb.

Mrs. Armitage, alarmed by Anne's look, turned quickly and then she started up. "Ross, what has happened?"

"Miss Ayres has had bad news." He tried to atone for his dolorous appearance by eliminating all emotion from his voice. "Her mother is dead."

The women answered with shocked ejaculations, and it seemed to him that he realized in Anne's voice a half-hysterical note of relief. He left them fluttering, and went to see about the car. When he returned, Cynthia was waiting at the door, as was Anne.

"I'm going along." Anne flung the statement

at him challengingly. "I can help her pack what she'll need."

Armitage recalled what Cynthia had said of having but one dress at a time, and the thought of Anne assisting in the packing of her few belongings stirred him to cynical amusement. Yet more than once in the next two hours, he was thankful for Anne's presence, for the masterful manner in which she delivered Cynthia from the tearful sympathy of Mrs. Gilmour, and for the finality with which she slammed the door shut in the face of the curious. He remembered vividly the bundle he had carried for Cynthia on her first railway journey, and he felt a guilty sense of relief at the sight of the black traveling bag, cheap, but conventional, which was presently brought downstairs.

As he had anticipated, it had not required many minutes to pack what Cynthia would need, and he was reasonably sure she would need all she had. She came down the stairs at Anne's side, dry-eyed and unnaturally self-controlled. The dinner was going on, and above the rattle of the dishes, Armitage could hear the comments of the diners on Cynthia's loss. He winced for fear she too might hear the brutally casual references, but if they reached her ears, she gave no sign.

Mrs. Gilmour had left the boarders to fate and the slatternly waitress. She was crying openly, and at the door she kissed Cynthia twice. "You've been a perfect lady ever since you came here. If you were kin to me, I couldn't feel worse to see you go." Armitage reflected with a little annoyance, that she was making her farewells as final as if Cynthia were to be away a year.

On the way to the station, he turned to ask, "Have you all the money you need." But it was Anne who answered, "Yes, she has everything she needs. We arranged that upstairs." Armitage should have been grateful for this thoughtfulness, but instead he had an irritated conviction that she had been officious, and in consequence he devoted his attention strictly to driving the car. The two women said no more than he but he was aware that they sat hand in hand.

After all, they had no time to spare. They bought her ticket, despatched the necessary telegram, and Armitage bought her several magazines. "There'll be a light in your berth and you can turn it on and read if you're not able to sleep," he said, realizing that without question, this was her first journey in a sleeping car. She accepted his offer indifferently. Ever since re-

ceiving the crushing news, she had seemed a pawn on a chess board, rather than a self-directing creature, and when the moment came for farewells, she said goodbye without emotion.

Armitage and Anne had bribed their way past the gateman, and saw her aboard. Through the window they watched her drop into her seat, and relapse in an instant into that strange apathy, oblivious alike to her surroundings, and to their friendly presence. They stood side by side unnoticed, till the train pulled out.

"Poor thing!" It was Anne who spoke as they climbed the stairs to the street level. Armitage was not in a conversational mood and least of all disposed to talk of Cynthia. "It's such a shame that with her ability and ambition, she should have to go back to the farm and tend babies."

Armitage stopped abruptly. "Babies?"

"Well, the oldest child isn't a baby, of course. But the new arrival will be a terrible care."

Armitage's expression as he faced her was revealing. Anne gave a little cry. "Oh, you didn't know! The poor woman died in childbirth. There's a little boy."

The young man took off his hat and wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead. "Well," he said helplessly, "I'll be damned."

CHAPTER VI

SWEET HOME

Cynthia reached home at sunrise. After her night of sleepless misery, stepping from the clamorous and dusty train into the freshness of the morning, seemed an entry into Paradise. On the station platform she faced the kindling east, and wondered if her mother, ending life's hard journey, had come out upon some scene as beautiful as this. The thought was so at variance with the depression and bitterness of her mood in the night just ended, that it pleased her to fancy it suggested by some invisible presence.

She turned from her tranquilising contemplation of the eastern sky to a scene of struggle, a lank youth swinging at the heads of a pair of restive horses, frightened by the train. Cynthia picked up her traveling bag, crossed the platform, and waited for the young fellow to master his plunging team. The dilapidated buggy looked, as far as she could see, hardly more battered than when she had viewed it last. The horses, in spite of their deceptive coltishness,

were old friends, and little changed. But the boy in corduroy trousers and flannel shirt had grown several inches in the few years since she had seen him. Cynthia stood watching his strenuous activities with wistful absorption.

As the rumbling of the train grew faint, the frightened horses quieted. Their master clung to their bridles till satisfied that their submission was not a ruse, then kicked each horse impartially and without rancor, apparently satisfied that the claims of discipline had been discharged. Then he turned to his waiting passenger.

The face confronting Cynthia was surprisingly boyish, when one took into account the height of the lean figure, and the sinewy · strength just demonstrated, though a stubble of beard apparent on close view, attested that the look of youth was in part misleading. The discolored straw hat, which by some miraculous chance had stuck to the wearer's head during his late scrimmage, was pushed so far back as to show a mop of heavy brown hair, worn long enough to curl. Cynthia looking for a smile of recognition, saw instead an expression of blank bewilderment.

"Good morning, Randall!" she said.

The boy uttered a sharp cry and sprang up on the platform beside her. "Kizzie!" he exclaimed, "It's you. I thought it was some swell

city dame, 'deed I did." He leaned over her as if to kiss her, and she put out her hand, without making it clear whether she extended it in greeting or to push him away. It served both purposes, for the young man, checked in his amorous intentions, caught the uplifted hand in both his own, and stood gazing down upon her tenderly.

"You've grown pretty, Kiz, prettier than when you went away. Honest to God you have."

"Let's be getting home, Randall. I'm tired."

"Sure thing." His conscience smote him that he had seemed unmindful of her weariness, and he atoned for this neglect by bustling haste. He stowed the traveling bag under the seat, and helped her into the buggy, yelling angrily at the horses, which in their impatience, made several starts while he was between the wheels. Tucking a ragged lap-robe over Cynthia's knees, he climbed to the place beside her. The horses bounded forward as he took the lines, and for a little, neither of the two young people spoke.

To Cynthia indeed, the moment was too poignant for speech. To the country-bred girl every breath of the fragrant air, every bend in the winding road was pregnant with memory. The shadow of her home life lay so black over

all her recollections, that she did not know till now how in her passionate search for beauty, she had missed the beauty she had left. Yet underneath the response of her half-starved nature to the challenge of meadow and tree and sky, a thought rang through her consciousness like the tolling of a great bell. She was going home, but not to her mother. She was going home too late to bring joy to the one she loved best.

Beside her Randall was stammering an awkward expression of sympathy. "I—I've been hoping you'd come back, Kiz. I've been crazy to have you come. But I—I wish something different had brought you."

"Yes, Randall, I know." She spoke with an effort. "You needn't tell me you're sorry, for I understand." She added as if to change the subject, "Were you at the house when my telegram came?"

"I was there all night. I—I sat up with her, Kiz. Your father said there wasn't no need, but I knew you wouldn't want her to be lonesome."

"Randall!" she cried, and swayed toward him, her eyes kindling. In an instant his arm was around her, crushing her to him.

"Kizzie," he panted, "that isn't nothing. I'd do anything for you, Kizzie. And the harder t'was, the better I'd like it." His trembling lips

groped for hers, but with all her strength she pushed him away.

"Oh Randall, please! Dear Randall, you don't want to make me unhappy. Please don't try to kiss me again."

"You kissed me when you went away."

"We were both younger then," she reminded him. "Hardly more than children. And you felt so bad that I was sorry."

"If that was why," he interrupted, "you've got more reason to kiss me now. I was only a kid when you went to the city, Kizzie, and I couldn't care about a girl the way I care for you now. When I see a pretty flower growing, or hear a bird tuning up before daylight, it's like seeing you, Kizzie, and hearing your voice. Everything beautiful has got you tangled up in it somehow. Lots of fellers get over it quick, when a girl goes away. You thought I would, didn't you? And instead, I'm drunk just with thinking of you, Kizzie."

His dilated eyes met hers and his statement hardy seemed an exaggeration. She faced him steadily.

"You know I'm in trouble, Randall, great trouble. Don't make things worse."

His arm still tight about her shoulders, relaxed. His tense face quivered.

"I know it ain't no time for courting," he acknowledged. "You're thinking of your mother, instead of me. It's a shame for me to have bothered you. Killing's too good for me, I guess."

A wan smile flickered about her lips, at this characteristic condemnation of himself. She slipped out of his encircling arm, and then softened the effect by patting his clenched hand. The horses, repenting of their earlier impatience, had gradually slackened their pace. They jogged at a slow trot on the levels, and fell into a walk as they climbed the hills. Randall turned his burning eyes on his companion.

"Are you in a hurry to get there?" he asked. "I'll touch 'em up if you say so. But it's near five years since I set eyes on you, and this can't last too long for me."

"No, I'm in no hurry."

"Thank you." He hesitated a moment then covered the hand nearest him with his own. The girl did not withdraw it, and they drove on almost without speech, while the sun rose higher and the plodding horses sweated on the sharp pitches of the road.

It was after eight o'clock when they reached the Ayres farm. Viewed from a distance, Cynthia's home did not lack picturesqueness. The

farm house, originally white, had been toned down by the weather to a silver-grey that blended harmoniously with the green about it. No tree stood near, but on the hills which rose sharply behind it, clumps of fir gave a fantastic suggestion of groups of cowled monks climbing the slopes toward the sunrise. The barn at the left of the driveway was big and in good repair, though defaced by an advertisement for a popular brand of liver pills, painted in huge black letters on the side facing the road.

As the horses turned up the drive, Randall felt the hand on which his rested, trembling. He tightened his clasp.

"Don't be afraid, Kiz. He's not going to hurt you."

"I'm not afraid." The steadiness of her voice seemed to contradict the tremulousness of the hand that sank into his. His eyes followed hers to the rusty streamers of crepe, blowing about in the breeze with unseemly sportiveness. Neither spoke again. Randall drove to the rear of the house, lifted Cynthia out, and followed her to the kitchen, bag in hand.

Apparently breakfast had been over some time. The table set in the kitchen, still bore the soiled dishes, coffee cups with a stain of brown in their bottoms, plates greasy with bacon fat,

while the crusts of bread strewn about the coarse cloth, were dotted with flies. Cynthia looked past the disorder unseeingly, but Randall grunted in disgust.

"Should think somebody might have washed up the dishes and had breakfast ready for you."

"I'm not hungry."

"Well, hungry or not, you ought to eat."

"I can't eat, Randall." Cynthia put her hand on the knob of the door leading into the next room, stood motionless as if rallying her courage, then opened the door and went in.

There were a number of people in the room, but for a moment Cynthia saw only her father. He sat in a straight chair which he had tilted back against the wall, and there was a pipe between his lips. In deference to the occasion he wore the suit Cynthia recognized as having been his best in the days before she left home, made of atrocious striped material, ill-fitting always, and now noticeably too small for him. As if in putting on his coat he had made his utmost concession to the conventions, he wore neither collar nor tie. His dark heavy beard was cut close to his chin, but his upper lip was shaved, showing his sensual mouth, with the strong yellow teeth, absolutely sound and somehow suggesting weapons of offense like the teeth of a dog. Had his

aspect been milder there would yet have been something almost terrifying in his bulk, the breadth of his shoulders, the depth of his chest, the muscles of his mighty arms. To his daughter, seeing him after her years of absence, as if she saw him for the first time, he seemed a survival of the monstrous shapes of pre-historic ages.

Ayres' small, rather close-set eyes, concentrated their gaze on Cynthia without recognition. After a moment as he realized her identity, he took his pipe from his mouth.

"Well, Keziah, you look very fine. You ran away from your father and mother, and now you're back home and your mother's gone. I've had bad luck in children, four boys not counting this last one, and I have to pay for every stroke of work done on this farm except my own. And as soon as my daughter gets big enough to be of some use, she runs off to the city."

He returned his pipe to his mouth, puffing with a relish undiminished by the ingratitude of the children he had begotten. Cynthia who had not spoken, now became aware of several people in the room, of a significant odor of flowers, of something dark and sinister up against the shuttered windows. Someone

touched her arm, and she turned to face a little group of women. Mechanically and still without speaking, she shook the hand of each.

"You look dreadful pale, Kizzie," said Mrs. Donnelly, a big, kindly-faced woman, and one on the Ayres' nearest neighbors. "Do you want to go upstairs and take off your things, or would you rather see your mother first?"

"She looks splendid, Kizzie," exclaimed another voice with an odd note of eagerness. "I dunno when I've ever seen such a pretty looking corpse."

Cynthia's gaze traveled around the circle. In some faces she saw only sympathy. In others was that dreadful curiosity she remembered only too well. As a child at the funerals she had attended as a matter of course, she had seen those greedy eyes watching the members of the bereaved family, to note the emotion displayed by each. To her childish imagination there had been something horrifying in that hungry look. Now she wondered if the monotony of their lives, the lack of healthful excitement rendered even the drama of heart-break a welcome diversion.

She found hands on her arms, impelling her gently toward the corner where the coffin stood, flanked by great clusters of flowers which gave

out an offensive fragrance. Cynthia drew back. "I want to go up to my room," she said in a stifled voice.

"Yes, yes, poor child! You look tired to death." Mrs. Donnelly waved aside the others with conscious authority. "Come right upstairs," she said, taking the bag from Randall's hand. She led the way, as if Cynthia had still to learn it. And indeed the girl following in her wake, had no sensation of being at home.

The painted stairs were narrower than she had remembered them. The upstairs rooms were smaller than she had thought, and the sloping ceilings came so close to the beds that they seemed to leave no space for air. Cynthia stood at the door of the room she had shared with Susan not five years before, and felt herself a stranger in a strange land.

Then a voice called her name, and a quaint little figure ran into her arms. Cynthia felt more than ever a stranger. The little sister she had left had been a fairhaired child. This Susan looked a dwarfish woman. Her face, swollen with long weeping, did not remotely suggest the face pictured in Cynthia's memory, but the clinging arms spoke a welcome to which the older girl's heart responded.

Mrs. Donnelly put down the traveling bag,

moved toward a quilt folded on the foot of the bed, and drew back a small blanket that covered it.

"It's a real nice boy," she said. "Seems a pity, Kizzie, that your mother never even saw him. I hope his food's going to agree with him, for at best you'll have your hands full bringing him up on a bottle."

Moving slowly and mechanically like a person hypnotized, Cynthia approached the bed. A little red, wizened creature slept peacefully under the sheltering blanket. Had it not been for this child, Cynthia realized, her mother months before would have followed the example of her children and run away. Had it not been for him she would now be enjoying the nearest approach to happiness her life had ever known. He had meant the failure of her dearest hope. He had cost her mother's life.

Susan standing at her sister's side, her arm about Cynthia's waist, broke into passionate sobs. "I hate him," she wailed. "He's spoiled everything, hasn't he, Kizzie?"

"Why, Susan Ayres," remonstrated Mrs. Donnelly. "It's dreadful for you to talk that way. That poor baby ain't a mite to blame for what's happened, no more than what you be. And it ain't for us to question the purposes of Provi-

dence," she added, with the fatalism so often passing current as piety.

Susan pressed closer to her sister. "I hate him," she repeated, her only concession to Mrs. Donnelly's reproof, the lowering of her voice to a rebellious whisper. "Whether it's his fault or whether it's not, I hate him."

And Cynthia staring at the red, wrinkled face, with its Buddha-like placidity, heard in her heart the echo of Susan's words.

CHAPTER VII

FROM A FAR COUNTRY

Cynthia was kneading bread. As her arms moved automatically, moulding the spongy mass that half yielded to her touch and half resisted, she had the dazed sensation of one who, waking from a vivid dream, finds the actual dreamlike and unreal. But in Cynthia's case she knew only too well which experience had been the illusion.

Her mother had been buried the week before, but already her grief seemed to belong to some remote past, not that it had lost poignancy, but that it had been set aside, as all grief must be sooner or later, in favor of the present pressing need. After a wakeful night with the baby, of whose nearness she was continually conscious, she had had her father's breakfast ready at five. Since then every minute had held its imperative task.

The day following the funeral Mrs. Donnelly had come over early to give Cynthia the necessary instructions regarding the baby's bath and

feeding, had wondered at her ignorance, pitied her awkwardness, and then gone back to her own household duties, which were already sadly in arrears because of her neighborly ministrations. Cynthia was still awkward with the baby, and vaguely humiliated by Susan's superior deftness and self-assurance. He seemed to her terribly new and frail and the realization that she was responsible for his very life was a formless terror in the background of her consciousness.

Cynthia watched the clock as she kneaded. Dinner must be ready at twelve, though her father might not come up from the fields until two, and by some magic she must make sure that the meal did not deteriorate through delay. Her thoughts raced on to the waiting tasks, like a frightened runner passing a church yard, always straining ahead, not daring to look back.

Susan staggered into the kitchen with a pail of water. The house was supplied from a pump located so as to be convenient to the barn. Each time she saw Susan, Cynthia was conscious of a stabbing disappointment. Her mother, weary drudge that she had been for many years, never altogether lost a suggestion of girlish prettiness, and death had given back much that life had taken away, so that the neighbor who pro-

nounced her "a pretty looking corpse," had voiced a general opinion. It was incomprehensible to Cynthia that any of her mother's children should look like Susan. Now as she saw the girl's body twisted grotesquely to balance the weight she carried, and her face sympathetically distorted, she realized with shocked resentment that Susan resembled her father. Her little stunted body was her heritage from an exhausted mother, but her face was her father's legacy.

"Susan," Cynthia said quickly, "you mustn't carry anything as heavy as that. You're not strong enough."

Susan set down the pail and grinned at her sister. "But there ain't nobody to do it but me and you, and you can't do everything."

"I'd better to do the harder things, because I'm older and stronger."

Susan stood with her arms akimbo. "Now listen here," she said, "I ain't much on looks, and though I guess I'm at what they call the homely age, I don't see no signs of me sprouting out into a Mary Pickford when I'm sweet sixteen, do you? Now honest!"

Cynthia recalling her recent discovery, had no answer but a blush.

"As long as I've been kinder spoiled in the cutting," continued Susan cheerfully, "I'd better do

the jobs that give you chillblains and freckles and stooped shoulders and black finger nails. There ain't no sense in having two sisters homely enough to stop a clock when one of 'em's got a good start for making a reg'lar heart buster."

"Susan!" protested Cynthia and stared at the stranger who was nevertheless her own flesh and blood. She began to realize that the impression Susan had given her of being dwarfed was due not so much to an undersized body as to a precocious maturity. She was not yet fourteen but she had already outgrown the illusions of youth and was prepared to find her happiness vicariously. Cynthia was little given to weeping, but now she felt the smart of tears under her lids. "We'll try not to have things too one-sided," she said unsteadily.

A faint squawk sounded from the adjoining room and Susan dashed to answer it as if it had been the call-bell of an exacting employer she dared not keep waiting. When she returned her arms cradled the diminutive fellow being toward whom she had declared her hatred.

"I guess he's lonely in there all by himself. I'd howl if they put me on my back some place where I couldn't see nothing or hear nothing."

"I think he's better off in the cradle," said the older sister disapprovingly. She slapped a fat

loaf into its waiting tin and set it back to rise. Her eyes went uneasily to the clock as they did countless times in the day. Its tick had become articulate. "Hurry up! Hurry up!" it reiterated endlessly.

Susan gazing down at the little red face on her arm, showed less than her usual responsiveness. "I guess it's a pretty lonesome world for babies. 'Twouldn't be so bad for twins, but ordinary single babies must feel funny with a lot of giants 'round. I wonder if they ever are afraid they've died and gone to hell."

Cynthia was shocked at her own laughter, not so much because she had laughed, as because of the bitterness of the sound. She said quickly, "Hadn't you better be getting the eggs?"

"All right." Susan returned the baby to its cradle and set out on her errand. Hardly had she disappeared when the rattle of wheels apprised Cynthia that she was not to be alone for long.

She was not surprised when the tall figure of Randall Baird slouched through the open door. The corduroy trousers he had worn the day of the funeral had been set aside in favor of denim overalls, but his lean brown face, with its shock of curling hair, was unchanged in its wistful yearning.

"Had to go to the village this morning, Kizzie, and I got the mail as long as the Free Delivery won't come 'round till tomorrow." He emptied a sagging pocket of its contents. "It's queer, Kizzie," he said, "but there's three letters here addressed to Miss Cynthia Ayres. They're directed to your box number, or else I'd have thought they wasn't meant for this house. But I guess it must be a mistake in the name."

"They're for me, Randall. Put them down anywhere. I haven't time to read them now."

He turned the letters over in his hand, his brow darkening.

"How are you so dead certain they're for you, when it ain't your name?"

"It was my name in the city."

"Cynthia?"

"Yes."

"How'd you come to have one name in the city and another here?"

"Because I hated my name," she said with passion, "just as I hated my life here. Because I meant to have everything beautiful I could get, and I could get a beautiful name, if nothing else."

"I don't see," he protested, his lips trembling, "that it's so durned beautiful."

Cynthia did not answer.

"Kizzie sounds good to me. But I guess 'most

any name that meant you would strike me about right."

Still Cynthia did not speak. The sight of the letters had unnerved her. They had made her realize the other life temporarily crowded from her thoughts. She longed to read them and yet dreaded the opening. She resented Randall's presence, resented the fact that though he watched her with pathetic adoration, he had not removed his hat.

"See here, Cynthia." He spoke in the tone of one who makes a concession. "As long as you favor the name Cynthia, I don't mind calling you by it."

"I don't want you to call me by it."

"You don't—why, I thought— Say, Kizzie, you're not mad at me, are you?"

His childish dismay touched her and made her a little ashamed of the impulse to which she had yielded.

"No, Randall, I'm not angry. It's only—" After all it was not easy to explain. "I don't want you to call me Cynthia because here I am Keziah Ayres."

He digested this in silence. "But in the city you're Cynthia?"

"Yes."

"Sounds like you're two people."

"At least two," Cynthia agreed wearily.

"I don't know whether you're laughing at me or not," Randall said plaintively. "But as long as you're Kizzie, and you're here I ain't going to worry about that other girl." One of his rare smiles irradiated his face. "So long as I have you, Kiz, the rest of 'em are welcome to Cynthia."

The girl sighed by way of answer. She had told him, she realized, less than the truth. She was Keziah Ayres, back in the treadmill, but Cynthia had taught her the savor of life, and the things that had once appealed to her could satisfy her no longer. She looked at the troubled youth sitting on the edge of the table, with his hat pushed back on his head, and remembered that though she had run away from him, his goodbye kiss had stirred her pulses. Cynthia he had never known, and he had lost Keziah.

She worked on silently, and he watched her as silently till Susan came in with the eggs. Then he stood up.

"Well, I guess I'd better be going. There ain't anything you want me to do for you, is there, Kiz?"

"No, Randall, thank you. I don't think of anything."

"I'll be over this evening," he continued hope-

fully. "Maybe you'll have some letters for me to mail or something."

"Don't come tonight, please, Randall. The baby is so restless. I've hardly slept since I came home. Tonight I must get some rest."

Her pallor and the black circles under her eyes bore out her statement. His first impulse to appeal from her decision lost itself in sympathy.

"All right, Kizzie. I'll come tomorrow unless you'd like me to drop in tonight, so's if you've got any letters to mail—"

"I shan't write any letters today, Randall."

"Well, I guess I'd better be going." He spoke half-heartedly, evidently hoping she would urge him to linger, and though disappointed in that hope, he nevertheless stayed on. Absorbed as she was in her own misery, Cynthia could not be oblivious to the pathos of his wistful face. She forced herself to say gently, "It's very kind of you to take so much trouble, Randall."

"I thought you'd rather have them letters today than wait till tomorrow."

"Yes, I'm glad to have them."

He cast a glance of dark suspicion at the missives Cynthia had cast aside to await a moment of leisure. "One of 'em's a hummer," he said with a forced laugh. "Had to have two stamps.

Gosh! I don't know what folks find to write about."

Cynthia did not reply. The baby must be fed at eleven. Her father's dinner must be ready at twelve. These imperatives held her thoughts enthralled. She had not even wondered as to the source of the letters. But now she felt the prick of curiosity through her apathy. Who indeed, had written her at such length?

It was late in the afternoon before she knew. The house was in order. Supper could be ready with a half hour's further work. The baby was asleep. Cynthia sat down on the kitchen steps with the letters in her lap. The postmark had a curious unfamiliar look, like the postmark of some foreign metropolis. She sat staring at the letters lost in reverie. Only a week ago she had been Cynthia Ayres. Only a week ago she had been part of the pulsing life of the city which now seemed the creation of a fantastic dream. She broke the seals lingeringly.

The firm with which she had been employed wrote with curt kindness, expressing sympathy for her loss, and regret for her resignation. The writer suggested that perhaps she had acted hastily in giving up her position. It was possible that after she had somewhat recovered from the

shock, she would see things differently. Her position would be held for her one month from the date of writing, and they would hope to see her back with them again at the expiration of that time.

Anne Rossiter's note was an acknowledgment of the check Cynthia had sent, repaying her loan and echoing faintly the regret of the business communication. "It does seem a shame," Anne wrote, "that you should feel it necessary to give up your work here, after getting such a good start. But of course you know the circumstances of the case so much better than anyone else that no one can advise you. Perhaps you will find country life stimulating to your poetic gift. I shall constantly watch the magazines for your work."

Cynthia folded the letter with a mirthless laugh and gave her attention to the third. Since the brief communication which had re-opened her acquaintance with Ross Armitage, she had received a number of notes from him, some of them literally a line, others covering a paragraph, but all brief, as was natural considering their frequent meetings. These closely written sheets gave her a comforting sense of friendly intimacy. The sight of Ross in the flesh would hardly have meant to her what his first letter did.

"Dear Cynthia:

"Your note to Anne Rossiter saying you would not return reached her this morning. I happened to be there at the time, and she gave me your letter to read. She had gathered, from what you told her the day you left that you were not coming back, but I was sure she was mistaken. I could not believe it possible you would consider such a suicidal step.

"I know from what you have told me that you have always hated your home, and while your mother's death may make you unmindful for a time of much that has rasped and fretted you, soon everything will be as intolerable as before. By the time this baby for whom you have resolved to sacrifice your ambitions is old enough to look after himself, your youth will be over—long before in all probability, for women grow old fast doing irksome work and eating their hearts out over it."

Cynthia looked away to the hills with a shiver. She knew the truth of the words she had just read better than he knew it, for she had seen many a pretty girl change in a year's time to faded, flabby middle age. Her casual glance at the mirror that morning had been enough to show lines new within a month, to show colorless cheeks, and lips that had lost the trick of smiling. He need not tell her that women situated as she was, grew old fast. It was a long minute before her eyes went back to the letter.

"The worst of it is that it is so damnably unnecessary. If your father is left with a baby on his hands, he will have to hire a woman to take care of it. He will probably call you ungrateful and undutiful and all that sort of thing, but it won't matter a button. As for your sister Susan, while I see that it would hardly do for you to kidnap her, she is not so very much younger than you were when you left home. Let her run away as you did, when the time comes, and then you can lend her a hand, so that she can escape the hardships you endured.

"Now is the time, Cynthia. The longer you stay, the harder it will be to leave. In the nature of the case, you cannot be attached to that baby, but after you have mothered him for a year or two, it would be agony to turn him over to another woman. You're like a fly in a spider's web. But you can break away now if you will. A little later the meshes will bind you hand and foot and you'll be a hopeless drudge to the end of your days."

Again she broke off the reading, resting her head in her hands. She could hear her heart pounding as it did on a Monday over the heavy washing. There was an intoxicating sweetness in the temptation to which, like another Eve, she lent her ear. She played with the thought of yielding and thrilled with nameless rapture. It cost her an effort to go on with her reading.

"Perhaps you're wondering how I have the nerve to interfere like this in your affairs. But

friendship wouldn't be worth much if it didn't entitle one to protest against such a diabolical sacrifice. I don't know how far your other gifts will carry you, Cynthia, but this I am sure of, that you have a rare talent for living, a genius for happiness. For God's sake, my dear girl, don't be swept off your feet by a sentiment natural enough under the circumstances, but damnable in its results. You are your own mistress. Tell your father that you can give him only another week—ample time for him to make arrangements. And then leave the responsibility on his shoulders where it belongs.

"As I read this over I notice a disinterested air about its arguments which is perhaps a little misleading. Every word I've written is true, but it is also true that I miss you and our good talks, miss you preposterously. Let me know when you're coming and I'll meet you at the train, and we'll have dinner somewhere—or breakfast as the case may be—before I hand you over to the rejoicing Mrs. Gilmour. Do the sensible thing, Cynthia, the thing that's fair to yourself, and take my word for it, you'll never regret it.

"Yours expectantly,

"R. J. A."

There was a faint aroma about the sheets in her hand. She guessed he had smoked as he wrote, perhaps taking his cigarette and his pen by turns, appealing to the great god Nicotine for inspiration in the strengthening of his arguments. Under the sudden somberness of her

mood, the natural reaction from her mad ecstacy, she felt the stir of a pride that was half heartache. He missed her, missed her preposterously. And while the end of the world had come, that was something to remember through the years when she would be neither dead nor alive.

The baby began to cry, feebly at first, then with the vehemence of a wronged soul, protesting against all of earth's injustice. Cynthia had meant to comb her hair and change her dress in honor of the close of the day's work. Instead she took the baby in her arms and hushed him. When Susan came in to ask about supper, Cynthia was asleep in her chair.

CHAPTER VIII

A DAY OFF

Nearly three weeks passed before Cynthia found opportunity to answer the letter which day or night was not far from her. Indeed it had seemed out of the question to answer it until a morning when her father drove to a near-by township to attend an auction sale. Although the work of the day was not materially lessened by his absence, the girl experienced an exhilarating sense of leisure and freedom in which all sorts of innovations seemed possible.

"You may give the baby his bath this morning, Susan," she said. "I'm going to let the dishes stand and write a letter." Nothing could have evidenced her brief emancipation more forcibly than allowing the dishes to stand unwashed, while she devoted herself to her neglected correspondence. It was in itself a declaration of independence.

While Susan delightedly took charge of the baby's toilet, Cynthia seated herself on the kitchen steps, her writing tablet upon her knee.

Her pen poised above the paper, she hesitated long over the beginning. Armitage had called her Cynthia repeatedly in his letter, but she could not bring herself to retaliate by the use of his Christian name, though to address him as Mr. Armitage seemed to put him at an insufferable distance. She compromised by an opening nicely balanced between familiarity on the one hand, and frigidity on the other, and wrote, "My dear friend."

Her hesitation vanished with the decision of this important point. To open up her heart to him was an enormous relief, even though what she would have to say would disappoint him, and distress herself. As her pen raced across the paper she had an impression of burdens lifted.

"It was so good to hear from you. I know just how the dead must feel when they remember the life they have left and the friends they have cared for, and long for a sign from them. There is no postal service between this world and the next—at least that is what most of us believe—but except for that I am as far removed from the life of the past few years as if I had died.

"You urge me not to make this suicidal sacrifice, my friend. I know it is suicide, but I have no choice. You think my father would hire a woman to take charge of the baby if I left. Instead he would make Susan his house keeper and the baby's nurse. He said the other day that

there was not work enough to keep both of us busy, and that Susan should be working for some neighbor, bringing him in a little money. I answered that if Susan left I should go back to the city, and that settled the question for the time being. To leave would be to throw the responsibility not on his shoulders, but on my poor little sister. She is only fourteen, but so terribly old and wise and unselfish. I never realized before how ghastly it would seem to have a young girl so self-forgetful. It's so contrary to nature."

Susan came in at this point to show the baby, shining and serene after his bath. Susan's broad, homely face was aglow with satisfaction. The hate she had declared so passionately the morning following her mother's death, had like Jonah's gourd, withered with the first sunrise. She was the baby's devoted slave and humble worshipper.

"Ain't he getting just grand?" Susan demanded, holding her small brother up for inspection. "And he's an awful clean-dispositioned kid. Some babies yell when you wash 'em. But Sweetness as soon as he sees me getting the tub ready, looks kind of happy. When you see how nice babies are, it seems kind of a pity they have to grow up. Because babies is always int'resting and folks generally ain't."

The baby, fragrant with talcum powder, was

handed over to be kissed. The older sister touched the soft cheek lightly with her lips, and drew a breath of relief to have the interruption over. But it was the inspiration for what followed in her letter.

"Susan loves the baby and gets her greatest happiness out of looking after him. I'm not that way. I couldn't be so cruel as deliberately to hold it against the poor little creature that his existence was purchased at such a fearful price, but I suppose unconsciously it influences my feeling. I try to do my duty by him, but I don't love him. I can't believe I ever shall love him.

"Miss Rossiter suggested in her note the possibility that my surroundings would inspire more of my little verses. I laugh when I think of it. My surroundings are chiefly a cramped kitchen, without so much as a pump in the way of conveniences. Think of carrying every drop of water that is used in a household of this size the length of a city block. And think what it will mean in the winter."

Cynthia stopped short with an expression of distaste. While she had meant to write freely, she had not intended to allow her letter to degenerate into a series of complaints. She made an impulsive movement to tear the sheet across, then checked herself, remembering it was almost three weeks since she had heard from Armitage. It would not do to let his letter lie too long un-

answered, and a precious opportunity like the one she had apparently misused, might not return soon. She had meant her letter to be something he would read with interest, perhaps more than once, and instead she had whined and would undoubtedly bore him. But it was too late to help it. Her disappointment tinged the closing paragraph.

"I'm sorry I've written like this, I don't know why I did it. But I hope in spite of such a dreary letter, I shall hear from you soon. Our friendship seems the only thing I've saved out of the wreck. Here I'm not the girl you know. Cynthia would run away again, but somebody has to stand by the ship and for all I can see it has to be

"Yours truly,
"Keziah Ayres."

Cynthia had counted on Randall's dropping in some time during the day, with his invariable offer of service. As it happened he came while she was occupied with the belated dishes. "Had to go to the village this morning for father, and I though maybe you'd have some errand I could 'tend to."

"Thank you, Randall. I'd like to have you mail that letter, please. It'll go a day earlier."

He picked up the letter, and to her annoyance

turned it over with deliberate intent, and read the address. But she half forgot her irritation in surprise as the color flooded his sensitive face, the angry tide sweeping to the roots of his hair.

"Some gink you know in the city, I reckon."

Her impulse to be extremely angry died as it was born. "Yes, I knew him in the city," she said quietly. "His mother was very kind to me."

"It's him you're writing to, I notice, not his mother."

She scoured a frying pan with exaggerated conscientiousness, and Randall's bluster oozed away, as she had known it would, leaving him tremulous, propitiating and somehow pitiful.

"I guess you think it's none of my business."

"I can't see that it concerns you, Randall."

"Maybe not. Only—well, it's nothing new for me to say I'm crazy about you, Kizzie. And when I think that some other fellow—"

He choked and swallowed as if about to cry. A pity, perhaps less kind than it seemed, prompted her to say, "It's the first time I've written him since I came home, Randall. I've owed him a letter nearly three weeks."

"Was he the one that wrote you that terrible long letter?"

Again she see-sawed between resentment and

sympathy, but in the end the latter emotion triumphed, and impelled her to comfort him even at the cost of his future peace.

"Yes, he wrote me a long letter," she acknowledged, "but not of the sort you think. It was a million miles from being a love letter."

"Honest to God?"

Cynthia compressed her lips in mute disdain, and the boy broke out passionately, "I don't mean that I don't believe you, Kiz, only—only—I can't see how any man can know you, and not get wild about you."

"Most men seem to find it quite easy."

He ignored her sarcasm. "Well, I'll mail your letter and maybe I'll find another to bring you. Ain't nothing else that you want?"

"I don't think of anything, thank you."

He crossed the room, thrust his hand into the dish pan, and caught hers, immersed as it was in soapy water. "Don't be mad at me, Kizzie," he pleaded, "even if I do butt in where it ain't any of my business."

"Oh please, Randall!" Her tone was a blending of exasperation and amusement. "That water's half grease."

"You're not mad, are you, Kiz?"

"Oh dear, no. But I shall be in a minute, if you don't let go of my hand."

He withdrew his dripping fingers, and wiped them meditatively on his trouser leg. "I guess I'd better be going," he said with that plaintive intonation which always seemed to ask why she did not urge him to stay longer. Then yielding to the insistence of her prompt goodbye he went out heavily.

That night Cynthia woke at two. The moon was full and the room drenched with light. On the pillow beside her she could see Susan's features, somehow sharpened by sleep, as all faces are sharpened by death. In his room downstairs her father snored thunderously. Cynthia slipped from her bed as she did nightly, and went into the adjoining room to make sure the baby was sleeping quietly. And then instead of returning to her bed, she sat down by the window in the full radiance of the moonlight, with a pencil in her hand. She wrote rapidly for several minutes without hesitating an instant for a word, or changing one she had written, then went back to bed, and fell instantly into profound slumber.

In the morning she read what she had written, her mood more perplexed than complacent. The exhilaration due to her father's absence the previous day still lingered in the shape of an unwonted sense of being her own mistress, and in

"INSTEAD OF RETURNING TO HER BED SHE SAT DOWN BY THE WINDOW IN THE . . . MOONLIGHT."

the course of the day she found time to copy with some care the pencilled lines.

GHOSTS

The ghosts I fear are not the ghosts of story,
Haunting old houses after dark comes on,
Wringing pale hands for griefs death failed to comfort,
Or back to taste some unforgotten joy.
Sometimes they patter down long corridors,
And the tap-tapping of their spectral heels
Carries a chill to hearts less stout than mine.
For these sad shapes of old wives' bogie tales
Are not the ghosts I fear.

Once long ago I knew a little child,
A happy little child who sang all day.
Not wise enough to know how much she lacked,
Or wise enough to find in pulsing life
Abundant compensation.
She would have laughed at one who called her poor,
With every day a treasure-house of joy.
She thought the earth a play ground crammed with toys,
And God the kindest play-fellow of all.

On spring nights often when the moon is high,
Flooding my room with pale, mysterious light,
Across the moonbeams, as upon a bridge
Spanning the narrow space between the worlds,
I see a childish figure make its way.
A laughing wraith, with open, eager eyes.
And when she, noiseless, stands beside my bed,

The little phantom of a long-dead self,
My heart beats fast with palpitating fear,
And my flesh pricks under the clammy sweat.
No frightful shape from the dim shadow world
Would have such power to chill the ardent blood
As this fair child, all innocence and joy,
The ghost of what I was.

Cynthia copied out the production for which she felt such scant responsibility and folding it, inserted it in an envelope addressed to Armitage. And then assuring herself by a glance at the clock, that she still had a few moments at her disposal, she scribbled off an explanatory note, omitting all preface, and plunging headlong into her theme.

"After telling you yesterday how impossible it was to do any writing here, I straightway wrote something. Or at least my hand had a share in it, though I can't feel that my brain was at all responsible. I waked out of a sound sleep and wrote these lines down, just as I have copied them for you, without a single alteration, though I can't remember that this particular idea ever entered my conscious thoughts.

"If I say that after this I shall always understand how certain people think themselves inspired, please don't misunderstand me. I don't mean that I think this sounds inspired, for it's a queer hybrid, not really verse, and yet not prose. But writing anything in the detached fashion in which this came, makes me feel a mere amanuen-

sis. Please tell me what you think about all this when you write. Today I believe it's safe to sign myself

"Cynthia."

The envelope, looking rather bulky, thanks to the poetic enclosure, was committed to the care of the United States mail, without the intermediary offices of Randall Baird.

CHAPTER IX

RANDALL'S GREAT MOMENT

THE hot weather began in mid-July. Nature showed herself not an impartial mother by favoring the growing crops at the expense of humanity. The corn shot up to rank height, fostered by a sun whose beams struck many a strong man dead, like a blow from a bludgeon. Old people fell into the way of dying. The infant mortality reached proportions compared with which King Herod's *coup d'état* seemed child's play.

Cynthia Ayres moved through the terrific summer days like one of the Hebrew children in the furnace, preternaturally aloof from the thought of personal discomfort. She lost weight of course, as she cooked over a murderous coal fire for the supplemented force of farm hands, or crept upstairs at night to the airless rooms under the eaves, where the accumulation of the sultriness of previous days intensified the fiery torment of the moment. Sometimes when the baby cried, she took him in her arms and carried him downstairs, and out into the dark, where the un-

roofed heat, occasionally stirred by a languid breeze, seemed cool in comparison with what they had left. The house had no porch either front or back, but often Cynthia sat for hours on the steps, a kimono over her night gown, and her feet bare, staring before her with wide, questioning eyes.

Her two letters to Armitage remained unanswered. At first she had looked for a reply daily, and then had reminded herself that she had waited nearly three weeks to write him, and that she had no reason to expect greater promptness on his part. The three weeks passed and still she waited, no longer expectantly, but with a chill at her heart. As she went mechanically through her work, a series of questions beat insistently on her brain, like the monotonous tapping of a hammer. What had she done to offend him? Could the lines on "Ghosts" have been poor enough to disgust him? What had she said to offend him? And on through the ghastly round again.

It was not till the coming of the cooler weather that she settled upon an answer. She could not possibly have offended him. Her poor little poem, whatever its short-comings, could not be held responsible for what had happened. She solved the problem logically at last, much as

one would work out the demonstration of a proposition in geometry. He had been interested in her, but only in her flesh-and-blood self. The pale emanations of her personality that found expression through pen and ink meant nothing to him. She had flattered herself in thinking that she had saved his friendship from the wreck. It began to look as if she had saved nothing.

It was toward the close of September when the pressure of farm work was appreciably lightening, that Randall Baird met Cynthia's father in the village post-office. Warily the younger man approached the older. Ayres never wasted time on social amenities. If he had nothing to say to an acquaintance beyond a good morning, he passed him without seeming aware of his existence. His small eyes fixed on a poster advertising the coming County Fair, obstinately refused to see the lank figure of his daughter's admirer.

Randall had intended to call for the Ayres' mail and provide himself with an excuse for stopping at the house and talking to Cynthia. It seemed that Cynthia's father had anticipated his purpose, for his big fist closed about a considerable package of mail matter. But that fist, strong enough to throttle an ox, was as clumsy as

strong. Just as Randall came up, two letters eluded the clutch of the thick fingers and dropped to the floor.

Randall, diving alertly to perform the obvious courtesy, was halted by a roar such as might have come from the throat of a gorilla. He looked up astonished at a red, threatening face.

"I was only going to pick up your letters, Mr. Ayres."

"You mind your damn business."

Randall stood back and watched his senior bend his broad back to the recovery of his belongings. Then unwarned by his previous snubbing, he volunteered another favor. "I'm driving right by your place, Mr. Ayres, and I'll take Kizzie's mail to her if you ain't going home yet."

"Mind your damn business."

Randall was puzzled by the other's heat. He was quite aware that Ayres did not approve his attentions to his daughter. It was not necessary to credit this bull-necked, low-browed parent with subtlety to assume that he was aware of Randall's consuming desire to marry the girl and remove her from the parental domination. While this program naturally was unpleasing, from his standpoint, it hardly explained his almost ferocious rejection of a simple act of politeness.

Randall swallowed the second "damn" with a gulp, as if it had been something hard and hot. "Oh all right," he said submissively. "Nice day, Mr. Ayres." To which Ayres responded by a cacophonous growl.

"Something's sure gone wrong with him," thought Randall, as he walked away. "Hope when he feels like chawing nails, he don't take it out on Kizzie." But this solution did not altogether satisfy him. Ayres' resentment had seemed personal rather than generic. The snarl with which he had declined Randall's offer, implied that the offer itself was unwelcome. Randall Baird, while far from intellectual, possessed a fair share of that ability popularly defined as knowing how to put two and two together. That afternoon he set this faculty to work.

It was a direct result of his reflections that he did not stop to see Cynthia on his way home, but postponed his call till evening. He found her seated on the kitchen steps, wan sentinel over the baby's cradle, which stood out upon the grass in the purple dusk.

"Good Lord, Kizzie, are you sick?"

The face that she lifted to his startled him not so much by its pallor, as by a drawn look that aged it indefinably. His heart turned a terrified somersault. Without waiting for her answer

he rushed on furiously, "Of course you're sick, and no wonder, working like a nigger to stuff them harvest hands and the thermometer doing a stunt in mountain climbing all the time. The wonder is you ain't dead."

"Hush, Randall." Her flexible voice made entrancing music in his ears as it caressed his name. "I'm not sick. I wish it were only that. It's the baby."

He was still trembling from his passionate outburst, and he had a vague impression of anticlimax as he repeated, "The baby! I hope nothing much is wrong with him."

"He frightened me so today." Cynthia lifted her eyes, ringed with dark circles, and again his heart contracted as he saw how frail she looked. "All at once he seemed so ill. He couldn't eat. He wouldn't take any notice of Susan. I called the doctor—it made father very angry. He thought it was a needless expense."

"Oh!" Randall was conscious of a vast relief. "That's what set him off," he thought.

"The doctor says the hot weather has been terribly hard on babies, and that I oughtn't to have let him sleep upstairs at all. He said the low rooms under the roof aren't fit for any creature, especially babies. Oh Randall, I shouldn't have gone on as if I knew it all. I should have

asked advice. I should have called the doctor in, to make sure I was doing right." Suddenly the tears were running down her cheeks. She swayed toward him, the movement an unconscious appeal to him to defend her against herself.

He answered by putting his arm about her, and she sank against him, hiding her wet face upon his shoulder. His heart beat suffocatingly. Instinct told him that if this were not surrender, it was its twin. Her lips were so near that he need only bend his head to kiss them. His shaking hand touched her cheek, felt the warm rain of her tears, and felt too, that she did not shrink from the contact.

But his lips instead of finding hers, framed a question that fell into the intimacy of the moment with a splash, like a stone flung into a fountain. "Kizzie did you—did you get a letter today?"

"A letter?" She moved back from him and his embracing arm felt her body instantly tense. There was a startled look in her upraised eyes. "No. Why?"

"I—well, I thought it had been quite a time since I brought you any letter."

"No one writes me any more," she said with no effort to disguise her bitterness. And then,

excusingly, "The people I knew in the city were not really friends, only kind acquaintances. And with them, it's out of sight out of mind, naturally."

The chance for his kiss was gone. She stood upright, still within the circle of his arm, but aloof in spirit. The impulse of yielding, the moment of capitulation, such as has been fatal to many a woman, was definitely over, and again the instinct of resistance was in control. Randall cursed the necessity of questioning her further, but blundered obstinately on.

"I guess there's one letter you got an answer to all right. The one to that town feller—Armitage is his name, ain't it? I remember he wrote you a whacking long letter about the time you came home." He felt her stiffen with anger.

She waited a moment, and then deliberately withdrew herself from his embrace before she said coldly, "O, no, I don't expect to hear from him again. He was a young society man, you see, wonderfully attractive and very popular. It would be too much to ask him to waste time on people of our class."

He could have wept in his disappointment and misery. The gift he desired most had been tossed by some careless god into his very hands, but he had failed to grasp it, and the rebound

had carried it further from his reach than ever. And he was not even comforted by the realization that uncouth rustic that he was, he had risen for one great moment to chivalric heights. He only told himself with bitterness that he was a fool, who could not take advantage of his chance when it came to him. He heard himself mumbling consoling assurances concerning the baby. He guessed the little fellow would be better in the morning. That was the way with babies, down one day, up the next. Even in his own ears his words seemed inane platitudes. He broke off suddenly in the middle of a sentence, wretchedly certain that it made no difference whether he finished it or not.

"I guess I better be going, Kiz," he said with a despairing gentleness to which at another time she could hardly have failed to respond. But the reaction from her late mood was still in control. She bade him goodnight indifferently and at his last glimpse of her, she was bending absorbedly over the baby's cradle, unmindful whether he stayed or went.

Few tools appeared so formidable to Randall as pen and ink. Yet when he reached home, he doffed his coat, and set himself to write to Ross Armitage. When he had finished, which was not till long after bed time, he was sweating as pro-

fusely as if he had been pitching hay under a July sun.

Dear Sir

a good while ago you wrote a letter to a girl who lives here whose name is Kezeiah Ayres in the city she goes by the name Cynthia Ayres she ansered that letter and I mailed it myself and now what I want to know is did you ever write her an anser because if you did she never got it today I was in the P. O. just as her old man was starting out with the mail and he dropped a letter sos I could see how it was directed it was directed to Cynthia Ayres and it looked to me like the writing of that letter you wrote her a good while ago I asked her tonight if she got a letter today and she said no I guess her old man dont care about her getting letters for fear shell up and leave him

no ofense meant when I say I dont care a dam about your letters only if she wants to hear from you I want she should as long as her old man is such a bad actor if you want to write her you better put it in an envelope directed to me and then Ill see she gets it

hoping these few lines will find you in your usual health

yours truly
Randall Baird
P. O. Box 31

Randall read over the laborious epistle with a haunting sense of being in the grip of something

stronger than himself and then went gloomily up to bed. His great moment had come and gone and left him only the sorrowful conviction that he was a hopeless fool.

CHAPTER X

THE SHOE ON THE OTHER FOOT

A FITFUL restlessness, difficulty in concentrating the attention, and occasional lapses into irritability commonly characterize men who have returned to civilian life, after longer or shorter periods of being only cogs in the great war machine. It was no surprise to Mrs. Armitage to recognize these symptoms in her son, and she said to Anne Rossiter that the only wonder was they had not manifested themselves long before. Her sympathetic understanding lending lustre to her rather pale eyes, Anne expressed her full agreement.

Cynthia's two letters, only a day apart, had stirred Armitage profoundly. The drab picture of her life under her father's roof had not bored him as she had feared. Indeed it had roused his masculine combativeness. He found it impossible to interest himself in the baby's future or the hardships of Susan's lot. Both of them seemed negligible personalities. But that Cynthia with her beauty and her brains and her zest

for life should become a withered old maid, sacrificing her youth and aspirations on so sordid an altar, was an intolerable thought. He wrote her at once at greater length than before, and making his appeal more personal. This time he offered no apology for interfering in her affairs, but tacitly assumed the right to interfere. As to "Ghosts," he suggested showing it to a friend better posted than himself on such matters. He promised to write again in a day or two, after securing an expert opinion.

Armitage was as good as his word, but when the time came for the summer exodus, he was still awaiting Cynthia's answer. He wrote her again, giving the address of the cottage his mother had taken for the summer on the Massachusetts coast, and he begged for an immediate reply, if only a line.

It was about this time that Mrs. Armitage began to notice in her son the restlessness and absence of mind characteristic of the returned soldier. While she accepted them philosophically as the inevitable consequence of experiences Ross had never brought himself to discuss even with her, she set about fighting them with all the resources at her command. She had invited Anne to spend a month with them, and she planned charming little week-end parties that filled her guest-rooms and made her own summer strenuous rather than restful. When Anne's

month was up, at Mrs. Armitage's request, she broke a series of engagements to stay on, and her hostess made no secret of her gratitude.

Fretted and puzzled as he was by Cynthia's stubborn silence, Armitage found Anne's presence paradoxically stimulating and yet soothing. He told her frankly that she had more frocks than any woman had a right to, and that such extravagance was most reprehensible, yet at the same time, as the dinner hour approached, he found himself looking forward to Anne's making her appearance in some new and startling costume. Not that Anne was always startling. Her little morning dresses were as demure as those of a school girl. She was constantly making herself something new under his eyes, a sweater or a hat or an embroidered blouse, and trying them on for his edification, apparently with the expectation of extravagant compliments. Anne was one of the competent young women of the period. She could run a car and a sewing machine with equal skill, put on a tire or re-model a Paris gown. She played a better game of golf than Armitage himself, swam like a mermaid, danced like a fairy and was a formidable opponent at bridge. Anne was equally ready for a ball or a fishing excursion, a formal dinner at a big hotel, or a luncheon of sandwiches eaten by the side of the road, midway on a tramp. Whatever a man's

mood, Anne fitted in. She would flirt with him convincingly if he were so inclined, or meet him half-way in as matter-of-fact a comradeship as if she had never worn a more feminine garment than her riding breeches. However distracted he might be by private worries, Armitage never reached the point of being oblivious to Anne.

Sometimes he told himself that he wished he had never met Cynthia Ayres, though he knew that he lied when he said it. Without Cynthia there would have been no problem. Had he not been haunted by the memory of Cynthia's eager face, her young eyes challenging life, he would have believed himself fortunate far beyond his deserts. His mother would have been happy, Anne would have been happy—he faced that truth with a grim certainty in which there was no vestige of masculine conceit—and he himself would without question, have been the happiest of all. But it was hardly worth while to think of it, since it was contingent on the impossible condition that he had never seen Cynthia Ayres.

And while he was making himself miserable about her, turning into a grouch when he should have been enjoying his summer, she had quite forgotten him. The placidity with which she ignored his letters proved that conclusively. He had written still again, begging for an answer, however brief.

The busiest woman could find time for a post-card. With a stab of that jealousy that antedates our humanity and goes back to our brute ancestry, he considered the possibility that another man was claiming her leisure. He remembered that Cynthia had sent her letters to her mother under cover to some friend—a man. He felt a savage interest in the personality of this unknown male, even though he was ashamed of so primitive an emotion.

Along in September his mother said to him casually, "Anne leaves Monday."

"Does she?" He was languidly regretful. "Why doesn't she stick it out till the bitter end? We're leaving ourselves before long?"

Mrs. Armitage's reply was postponed till he looked to see the reason of her hesitation. She said quietly, "An invitation from the Peabodys came yesterday. I think it is better for her to accept it."

She gave him time to digest this, then continued impartially, "I'm devoted to Anne. I've enjoyed having her here more than I can say. But at the same time, I regret it. Very selfishly I put your interests and mine before hers. It hasn't been fair to Anne."

Armitage glowering at the floor, approved his mother's verdict. Anne's destiny was to marry, and to marry well, her manifest right. Cooping her up in a seaside cottage with his mother and him-

self all summer was equivalent to tagging her preëmpted. The men who had been attracted by her, and they were many, would console themselves with prettier girls and richer girls and girls more easily won. Decency left him no alternative to asking Anne to marry him. If only he had never met Cynthia!

He rose to his feet, impelled by the instinct of every suffering man—an instinct incomprehensible to most women—to get off by himself. His tortured face alarmed his mother. She prayed every night that he would marry Anne, but if the answer to her prayers was to bring that look into his eyes, she wished her petitions unsaid.

"Ross dear, you know that what I want most in this world is your happiness."

He knew that she believed it, and took this inopportune moment to speculate as to her attitude in case he should find happiness in marriage with Cynthia. But under the circumstances he did not trouble to press the inquiry. He stooped and kissed her cheek, muttered some explanation for his abrupt departure, and left the house.

From the wide porch he stepped into a world of mystery. Early the previous afternoon a fog had blown in from the sea, and instead of dissipating with the sunrise, it was now denser than ever. It was impossible to see across the road. The ocean

had been blotted out. The rattle of an occasional wagon, moving warily, seemed a fantastic echo from a distant world. As he advanced through the enveloping moisture that left drops on his cheeks like tears, he found himself thinking, "And the earth was without form and void."

The fog was an agreeable counter-irritant. There was just enough danger in venturing abroad to force him to be alert, and this distracted his mind from his own worries. He groped his way to the murky fishing village, and found a boat preparing to put out. The owner, Hiram Cobb, whom he had accompanied on several fishing trips, explained that a fishing boat that had left the previous morning had not yet come in. There had been no wind, of course. The supposition was that they had failed to take a compass along. "Eben Drew is just durn fool enough," Hiram opined, "to put out to sea for an all-day trip without a compass."

Ross' eyes gleamed. The durned foolishness of Eben Drew provoked his gratitude. Here was his chance to get away from the world of women, from the worry of their caprices and exactions, from the tiresome hum-drum round, and the spice of danger gave added zest. Eloquently he made his plea to accompany the expedition, while Hiram Cobb stroked his beard and pondered frowningly.

All unwittingly one of Hiram's crew came to

Ross' assistance when he murmured his contemptuous estimate of a "silk stocking dude," the slang of a previous generation answering his modest requirements. Hiram wheeled upon him. "To hell with such talk! He's been across. I never heard tell of silk stockings in the trenches, nor no dude leading a charge across No-Man's Land." He turned to Ross with an awkward attempt at the military salute. "We'll be proud of your comp'ny, Lootenant."

"I'll have to send a message to my mother. Who of you boys will carry a letter to Mrs. Armitage at the Dolphin Cottage?"

It took him a few seconds to find his messenger, and scarcely more to scrawl a line of explanation. He negotiated the loan of a suit of oil-skins from a fisherman who saw no likelihood of needing them immediately, and took his place with the others. As the boat pulled out into the mysterious grayness, that seemed a blending of the elements, neither water nor air, but a marriage of the two, he had an exhilarating sense of escape.

It was twenty-four hours before their return, and then they came without the boat they had sought. But at sunrise the fog had lifted, and Hiram had remarked dispassionately that even that darn fool Eben Drew could find his way home if he were alive, while if he had been run down as his folly

deserved, they could not help matters by going without their breakfast. A little before nine o'clock, Ross climbed ashore cramped, dirty and ravenously hungry, and dizzy for lack of sleep.

The house-maid sweeping the porch of the Armitage cottage, started as his disreputable figure mounted the steps. Then she moved quickly toward the open door, but thought better of it, and stood back to let him announce himself. The door opened directly into the living room, and without warning Armitage stumbled in upon Anne.

She did not see him immediately. She was lying back in an arm-chair, her profile toward him and her long arms extended so that her hands lay palm downwards upon her knees. Her pose suggested the relaxation of weariness, though with an undercurrent of alertness. He had an instantaneous, disquieting impression of something wrong with Anne. Her hair, usually so sleek under its net, was disheveled. Her skin had lost its freshness. Even her frock, an incongruous costume for morning, was somewhat wrinkled. As he stood staring, she turned her head and saw him. Without a word she leaped to her feet and ran to the foot of the stairs.

"Mrs. Armitage," she cried. "Mrs. Armitage! He's come. O, he's come!" Her voice vibrated with intense excitement.

A maid looked over the bannister. "Miss Rossiter," she said, in a discreet undertone, "I think Mrs. Armitage is asleep."

"Then wake her, wake her. Don't lose a minute. She'll want to know."

"And beside," Armitage interjected with jocular intent, "it's high time she was up."

Anne turned and he perceived her oddly changed from the tranquil woman in the armchair, flushed, stirred, almost beautiful. But there was only reproach in her voice as she said, "She didn't go upstairs till six o'clock."

"Six o'clock! You mean— O, the devil."

"We couldn't sleep, of course," Anne said gravely. "Not with you in such danger. We read and talked and tried to think of other things. But at six o'clock your mother was so tired that I begged her to go upstairs."

He laughed without concealing his annoyance. "Danger! What did you do those months I was on the other side? Sit up all night and get your nerves on edge fancying things?"

"I'm sorry if you're angry, Ross," Anne replied. To his consternation she began to cry. But weeping with Anne did not mean a surrender of self-control. She did not sob nor snivel nor grow red-nosed. The tears slid down the curve of her cheek, without compromising her poise and dignity.

"Anne!" Armitage was conscience-stricken. "Don't cry for Heaven's sake. I didn't mean to be such a brute. I ought to go down on my knees and thank you two for wasting a thought on me. But I'm not as ungrateful as I seem, Anne dear. It provoked me, that's all, to have you and mother sitting up worrying all night, when I was having the time of my life."

A contraction of her throat showed that his consolatory efforts were not altogether effective. The tears continued to follow one another over the slope of her cheek, and to drop bead-like to the white shoulders below.

"I can't take my handkerchief and wipe your eyes," apologized Armitage, "for I've used it in the last twenty-four hours not merely as a handkerchief, but as a napkin, and a bath towel. And I can't kiss the tears away, because I'm dirty and smell disgustingly of fish. Here! I'm going to commandeer this thing. It hasn't got a needle concealed about its person, has it?"

He had noticed a piece of embroidery in his mother's work-basket on the table, a gossamer bit of chiffon, admirably suited, it seemed to him, to remove the visible traces of Miss Rossiter's overstrained nerves. But as he reached for it, his extended arm suddenly became rigid.

On the table before him lay a letter addressed to

himself, and forwarded from the city. The clumsy handwriting was not familiar, but the post-mark, cruelly legible, set his heart to thumping. The thought took possession of him that Cynthia was dead, that at last someone had written to tell him so. White with emotion, he snatched up the letter and ripped it open. Anne Rossiter was forgotten as completely as if she had never existed.

As Armitage read Randall's letter, Anne read his face. She saw successive waves of passion sweep across it, and transfigure it, anger, relief, and then a great tenderness. She turned and went upstairs. She was a brave girl, but for once her courage failed her. To stand by forgotten as he read tidings of another woman, was a test to which she was unequal. In her room where she had dreamed so fatuously, she set about changing her last night's dinner gown for a morning dress. Her impulse to weep had passed and the tears Ross had forgotten to wipe away dried unnoticed on her hot cheeks.

Mrs. Armitage came downstairs pale and heavy-eyed and made a pretense of scolding her son. But her spurious anger became genuine when he said casually, "You won't mind my taking one of the cars for a few days, will you?"

"Why, what do you mean? Where are you going?"

"I've got a rather important matter to attend to. I don't expect to be gone a week."

She looked at the spot where the letter had lain, and then he knew that she and Anne had noted the post-mark and discussed the source and meaning of the missive. The boyishness went out of his face and left it grim.

"You can hardly go before Anne leaves, Ross. After she has been here all summer." The tension in her voice showed that the significant part of her sentence remained unspoken.

"My dear mother, if anyone has kept Anne here on false pretenses, it surely isn't I."

Her eyes were steel as she faced him. Nothing about her suggested the maternal, tender creature who had sat wakeful all the night through, tormented by unreasonable fears for his safety.

"I can't protect you against your own folly, my son. I can only ask that you will not fail in respect to me and courtesy to our guest."

"Mother, I'm awfully sorry. But this is something that won't admit of any delay." Since reading Randall's letter Armitage realized that several months had passed since Cynthia had heard from him. He guessed her feeling by his own, except that the woman's humiliation is always keener and more bitter than the man's. To send her an explan-

ation through a self-appointed arbiter was not enough. While he was sorry to offend his mother and even sorrier to hurt Anne, delay was out of the question.

Three quarters of an hour later they sat down to breakfast, a bath and a shave and a change of garments having sufficed to transform the disreputable vagrant, whose approach had frightened the maid, into a presentable young man who could not possibly frighten any woman. Anne and Armitage did all the talking through the meal and each laughed conscientiously at the other's jokes. But the lady at the head of the table remained wrapped in a disdainful aloofness which forbade her to countenance their frivolity by the glimmer of a smile.

CHAPTER XI

SURPRISES

ARMITAGE made the run between the seaside cottage and the inland farm at a speed the manufacturers of the car would gladly have mentioned in their next advertisement. Excitement mastered his fatigue. He had been awake over forty hours when he stopped to snatch a little sleep, and soon after dawn he was again on his way, his sense of exhilaration increased by the chilly tang beneath the morning's freshness, like the claws of a cat barely unsheathed in her velvety paws. Just what he was racing toward with his nerves tingling, he could not have told.

It was mid-afternoon and the September sun was endeavoring to demonstrate itself not a whit inferior to the over-rated suns of July and August, when Armitage turned up the drive that led to Cynthia's home. He had asked his way more than once, and had little doubt that he was right, but spying Susan staggering homeward with a pail of water from the inaccessible pump, he thought best to confirm his certainty by the inquiry, "Does Mr. Ayres live here?"

Susan set down the pail of water and faced him. He was immediately struck by her resemblance to a gargoyle.

"Yes, he lives here," she replied cautiously, "but if it's lightning rods you want to sell, pa's got all he wants, and if it's sewing machines he don't want any."

Susan's reply had been an unconscious introduction. The "pa" revealed her as the little sister of whom Cynthia spoke so tenderly, and Armitage felt at once that the older girl could not have exaggerated the younger's virtues, goodness impressing the most of us as Heaven's rather questionable method of atonement for withholding all physical charm. It took him a minute to rally from the shock sufficiently to explain, "I'm not selling anything. I wish to see Miss Ayres, Miss Cynthia Ayres, if she is at home."

Susan's face brightened.

"You must be one of Kizzie's friends from the city. Anyway—" she hesitated, with an air of correcting a misstatement— "anyway, one of the folks that knowed her when she was down there. She says she didn't have a chance to make no real friends, she was so busy. But Randall says that everybody down there calls her Cynthia, and we call her Kizzie."

Armitage did not feel it necessary to explain his

exact status to this precocious child. "Yes, I knew your sister in the city," he replied, and as he alighted from his car, "Would you mind telling her that Mr. Armitage is here?"

"Oh you can go right in. That way!" With a stubby forefinger Susan indicated a side door opening directly into the living room. "Kizzie's in there with the baby. I guess," she hazarded, evidently voicing her own agreeable impressions, "I guess she'll be pleased to see you."

Armitage walked across a stretch of neglected lawn, and not being averse to taking Cynthia by surprise, he acted on Susan's authority, pushed open the door indicated, and entered. The surprise was his.

A haggard woman looked up from the cradle over which she had been bending, stared at him unseeingly and then spoke in accents of disappointment, "Oh, I thought it was the doctor."

The atmosphere was chilling to romance. Cynthia was more than haggard, more than disheveled. Had she been another woman he would have thought her slovenly. Her hair was twisted in a loose coil and straying locks fell about her face. Her print gown was soiled. She had thrust her feet into a pair of old slippers, sizes too large for her. Nothing about her suggested the eager girl who had caught his fancy in a chance meeting years before,

and her manner implied not the wounded pride he had anticipated, but complete indifference.

Yet paradoxically, a wave of joy surged over the young man, and left him exultant. For now he knew. While he had raced up hill and down in the stillness of the night and the splendor of the morning, a question had come unbidden again and again. Was this a fancy that would pass? Was it the girl's unlikeness to other girls of his acquaintance that piqued his interest? Or was it the real thing at last? As he faced the disordered woman, bending over the child's cradle, the question was answered for good and all.

He went toward her speaking her name. "Cynthia!"

"Oh, Mr. Armitage." She was on her feet instantly, a slight flush staining her pale cheeks. "What must you think of me. I—I supposed you were the doctor." The last word came wailing from her lips.

"Is it the baby that's sick? I hope nothing much is wrong with the little chap." He looked downward into the cradle, and took a step backward. The face against the pillow seemed a waxen mask, caricaturing babyhood. The skin was drawn tight, no trace of infantile chubbiness remaining. The closed eyes were sunken and the colorless lips had fallen apart. Two tiny claw-like hands lay

motionless against the coverlet. Armitage looked in silence.

"I think he's a little stronger today," Cynthia said with tragic hopefulness. "He hasn't been really well for some weeks. The summer was terribly hot here. I think he'll improve fast after the weather's settled."

She put aside a lock of hair that fell across her eyes, obscuring her vision, and the gesture seemed to bring to her realization of her unkempt appearance. She looked down at herself with a slow despairing shake of the head.

"I'd apologize if it were worth while," she said. "But you know—no, you don't. The work has to be done whether the baby is sick or well. I haven't even had my clothes off at night for more than a week."

He conquered the impulse to take her in his arms. "Cynthia," he said, "before I tell you how sorry I am, I want an understanding. Have you received all my letters?"

The blood leaped to her forehead. "All your letters," she repeated. "I received one."

"You waited three weeks to answer that. And then you wrote me, and a day or two later, sent me your poem. I wrote immediately answering the letter, and again soon after, to tell you something of interest about your 'Ghosts.' Since then I've

sent you a number of nagging little notes begging for a line. How many of them have you received?"

She put her hand to her throat. "None of them," she said. "Not one." Her voice dropped to a poignant whisper. "Not one," she repeated.

"No great loss," the writer of the letters assured her brightly. "But I wanted you to understand. And you see how it was at my end, Cynthia. I thought you'd turned me down cold. I've been a devil of a fellow to get along with this summer."

It was the old Cynthia who looked up at him and smiled. But she disappeared at once, for as her eyes dropped to the cradle, a wan cloud came between herself and him. He knew that she was reproaching herself for being happy even though for less time than a man could hold his breath, and he hungered to comfort her. But instinct warned him to make haste slowly.

He said with all the matter-of-factness he could summon, "Now I see your hands are full. Set me to work. I did K. P. duty in the training camp you know, and I can pare potatoes with any woman alive."

"I can't imagine you paring potatoes," she said, again diverted long enough for a grave smile. "It won't be necessary for you to help. Oh!" Consternation quivered through the monosyllable. "Have you had your dinner?"

"At twelve sharp. I was as hungry as a wolf. You see I was up day and night." Then presently, "Shall you need any more water today? I'd rather carry it than allow Susan."

In the end he carried both the water and his point. With a tact hardly to be expected from his sex and condition, he left Cynthia to herself while he made friendly overtures to Susan. Cynthia's unattractive sister had given him open-eyed admiration from the first and she proved an easy victim. When taking the tea towel he began drying the dishes as she washed them—there was a formidable pile of dishes, evidently the accumulation of several meals—Susan went off into a gale of laughter.

"Looks so funny to see a man wiping dishes," was Susan's explanation of her hysterical outburst. "You're the first I ever see but Randall Baird. Once he helped me when Kizzie was working in the city."

"Randall seems quite a friend of yours," remarked Armitage, interested in this second reference to his unknown correspondent.

Susan turned toward him, her grotesque little face rendered more grotesque than ever by a mysterious contortion. It took him a moment to realize that she was winking at him.

"Oh yes, Randall's a great friend of mine. Little

sister's likely to be pop'lar when there's a good-looking big sister in the house."

"I see. Then you didn't consider Randall's friendship disinterested."

"He'd act exactly the same if I had two cross eyes. But I don't blame him for getting crazy about Kizzie. She—well, I don't mean now for what with being up nights and working so hard all day, she's like a piece o' calico that's all faded out. But when she gets her sleep proper, she *is* pretty, ain't she?"

"Very pretty."

She regarded him from the tail of her eye. "Did you come all this way just to see Kizzie?"

"Well, I had a little matter of business to attend to, a bill to settle," explained Armitage, thinking of Cynthia's father. "And I thought I'd improve the opportunity to see your sister."

"I guess Kizzie's glad to see you if she don't show it. I should think she'd have to be." The evident sincerity of this compliment was flattering and Armitage, laying his hand on his heart, bowed low.

Before Susan had time to comment on this civility as she was plainly on the point of doing, a Ford car stopped outside. "The doctor," Susan cried and scurried away. Abandoned by his commanding

officer, Armitage seated himself on the edge of the table, tea towel in hand, to await Susan's return.

The sudden opening of the door behind him brought him to his feet with the realization that it was an inopportune time for his first interview with Cynthia's father. But the man who entered was too young to claim that honor. He was tall and thin, with hair much too long, judged by Armitage's exacting standards. Under his rather heavy brows his eyes looked out hot and unhappy. The sight of a well-dressed stranger apparently so much at home, wiped from his lips the smile with which he had entered and his jaw closed with a snap. His manner reminded Armitage of a discreet dog, who sees a stranger in the vicinity of his master's chicken yard.

It was inevitable that each should at once suspect the other's identity. Randall was the first to voice his suspicion. He advanced with an air almost threatening. "Is your name Armitage?"

The young man thus challenged laid down the tea-towel. "Yes, I am Armitage," he said. "And I suppose you're Randall Baird."

"That's my name."

"I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Baird." Armitage extended his hand. "I want to thank you for the service you did me."

Randall intensified his resemblance to a watch dog by an inarticulate growl.

"As far as that goes," he said hoarsely, "it don't make no difference to me if she never gets your letters—not a damn bit. But if she's kind of looking for 'em, and disappointed—" He seemed to choke over something at this point and found it impossible to continue.

"Exactly," Armitage said. "I understand just how you feel. The letter you saw dropped in the post-office that day, Mr. Baird, was only one of a number that I have written to Miss Ayres without receiving any reply. Under the circumstances I thought I'd run up and get the matter straightened out."

"Maybe Kizzie'll find time for you," said Randall with bitter emphasis. "It was bad enough before the kid was sick, but now it's worse. Even if she talks to a fellow, she's thinking of something else. It's durn queer about that kid," he philosophized, his relief in unburdening his heart rendering him for the moment unmindful of his prejudice against Armitage personally. "Susan was always fussing over it, kissing it and talking baby talk and all that kind of foolishness the way girls will. But Kizzie never did. If you'd 'a asked me, I'd have said she didn't really like it."

Armitage recalled Cynthia's confidence but held his peace.

"But now the kid's sick," Randall continued, "it's the whole show. Nobody else is one, two, three. I could fall right down there beside the cradle and have a fit and she'd never look at me. She'd never even know it."

Armitage thought it best to meet him half way. "Yes, I could see she was engrossed by the child. I expected her to be astonished when I walked into the room. She hasn't heard from me in months, you know. And all she said was, 'I thought you were the doctor.'"

Armitage imitated the tone of disappointment with which Cynthia greeted him, and had his reward in Randall's radiant response.

"That's it," he said. "She don't think anything about you. She don't even see you. The kid's the whole show, doggone it."

The doctor's visit brought no cheer. A disheartened Susan repeated his verdict to the two men.

"Kizzie asked him if he didn't think the baby was a teenty bit better, and he said all the difference that he could see was that he was a little mite weaker."

Randall exploded at once. "I'll give Doc Bates a piece of my mind, first time I see him. What's the good of being so durned honest? What's the use

of a doctor, if he can't give you a little comfort? Now Kizzie won't sleep a wink tonight."

"And anyway I think Kizzie knows better'n the doctor does," declared Susan. "Babies won't ever show off, 'cept with their own folks. They like to fool strangers. I bet the baby is just laughing inside himself to think how he fooled the doctor."

Armitage recalled the waxen little face against the pillow and his judgment was on the doctor's side. But being under no professional obligation to shatter Susan's hopes, he reserved his opinion and finished drying the dishes, his task no easier now that the water in the dish-pan had cooled.

The white Cynthia, dropping medicine into a spoon, her lips moving mutely as she counted the drops, seemed as remote as the moon. She could spare no thought for him that day, he felt sure. Moreover Armitage was beginning to feel the necessity of paying his belated tribute to the great god Morpheus. He bade Cynthia goodbye, ending casually that he would see her on the morrow, made his adieux to Susan, and followed Randall outside. "Perhaps you'll be good enough to direct me to a hotel," he suggested.

Randall pulled a blade of grass and began chewing it. "I've heard," he said tentatively, "of a durned nice hotel in New York city."

"Little too far, I'm afraid, for my present needs."

"You going home tomorrow?"

"No."

"Well, if you've got your heart set on hanging around here, the best you can do is Nesbitts' in the village. Keep right on over the hill till you come to the village, and anybody'll show you Nesbitt's. The grub's rotten—so the traveling men say—and the beds are bad, and the place ain't clean, and they'll skin you alive, if you let 'em. But you can't do better 'round these parts, than Nesbitt's."

"Thanks, old man," said Armitage, getting into his car. "Hope I'll see you often while I'm here. Good afternoon."

Randall watched the car taking the rise of the hill, a sense of injury his dominant emotion. He wanted to hate Armitage for his manifest advantages, but hate proved unexpectedly difficult. He longed to accuse him of arrogance, of presumption, of flaunting his sense of superiority, but his conscience refused to countenance such accusations. Kizzie's city admirer had a way with him. He was agreeable without being condescending. Randall put it in a phrase, complimentary from his standpoint, "just as common as you or me." Courageous, too. He had not been afraid to make himself ridiculous by doing a woman's work under the eyes of another man. Randall, who on one occasion had dried the dishes for Susan, had worked with his heart in his

mouth lest his ignominious occupation should be discovered by some one of his own sex. With every inducement to hate this dangerous aspirant for the favor of the only girl that mattered, he suspected himself of a shame-faced liking for his rival.

Doggone such a fellow!

CHAPTER XII

THE CLOCK STRIKES

Cynthia's father was selling cattle and consequently was away from home for several days, his absence explaining the fact that Armitage had been a daily visitor at his home for a week without encountering him. In those seven days the young man had refrained from all love-making. He had taken to heart that saying of Susan's that her sister had lacked time to make real friends during her sojourn in the city. Armitage guessed the bitterness back of that declaration, and before announcing himself Cynthia's lover, he bent his energies to prove himself her friend, a stalwart helper in all emergencies, a refuge in trouble.

A broad-shouldered and muscular young man determined to be of service, will find a niche in most households. Armitage cut wood and brought water. With masterful authority he took the harder tasks out of the hands of the two over-worked girls and discharged them himself. Thanks to his car he was a *beau ideal* of an errand boy, running into the village with as little fuss as he would have gone to

the barn. He ordered candy from the city by telegraph. He took Susan for spins over the winding country roads, and insisted on Cynthia's going upstairs to lie down while he kept watch by the cradle. Randall Baird, dropping in whenever he could spare a half hour, gazed dumbfoundedly on his varied activities. Sweeping out the kitchen, by gum, with a gingham apron tied around his waist. Didn't seem to know he was making himself a laughing stock, or if he knew, he didn't care. Dog-gone such a fellow!

On the occasion of his first meeting with Cynthia's father, Armitage was not sweeping the kitchen nor performing any other duty inconsistent with Randall's ideas of what was due his sex. So effective had his assistance been, that by four in the afternoon the work of the menage was actually out of the way. Cynthia had donned a fresh gingham, and in spite of her pallor, looked delightfully like herself. Armitage knew it was useless to propose her leaving the house long enough for a drive, but he ventured a suggestion almost as drastic. "Listen! As long as the baby is better, leave Susan to look after him for a little, and come outside with me. It's a glorious afternoon and you might as well be serving a prison term for all the outdoors you get. Don't you think I deserve a reward? Haven't I been good?"

"You've been perfect," she said, a little trill of happiness in her voice that gladdened his heart, even though he knew she was not thinking altogether of him. For it really looked as if in the baby's case, the long lane had turned. That morning he had opened his eyes. He had taken double the amount of nourishment he had taken the previous day. Armitage had felt it a cruel kindness to encourage hope he believed without foundation, and up to this time had listened without comment to Cynthia's passionate asservations that the baby was better, that he must be better. Today for the first time he agreed with her, and agreeing, thought first how to use her new buoyancy for her benefit, and incidentally, for his own pleasure.

He carried two chairs out to the stretch of grass shaded by the house, there being no other shade available, and set himself to turn her thoughts from the monotonous routine of her daily life. Cynthia's response was all that he could wish. But before he had time for more than the introductory skirmish to his carefully planned attack, there was a sound of wheels upon the drive.

Armitage's face showed his irritation. "There's young Baird again," he exclaimed. "Upon my word he's ubiquitous. He doesn't give a fellow a chance."

Cynthia's ear was quicker than his. She shook

her head and he realized that her face had lost every trace of color. "It's father," she said.

Ayres drove a bony mare, attached to a buggy in which he sat with one foot hanging out at the side, as if the vehicle were not spacious enough for him. Opposite the two young people he stopped, jumped over the wheel with astonishing lightness for a man of his weight, and strode in their direction. Armitage rising and turning to confront this formidable figure, said to himself, "The Neanderthal man!"

There could be no doubt that Ayres did not approve his daughter's occupation, or rather the lack of it. Even at a distance, his face showed an angry redness. With his small, close-set eyes, his low forehead and heavy jaw, with the brutal bulk of him, and his menacing manner as he advanced, Armitage's comparison did not seem over-drawn. He looked rather a connecting link between the brute and the man, than a thing altogether human. One would hardly have expected him to be capable of articulate speech.

Cynthia had started to her feet as Armitage rose, and stood at his side. He noticed, with a quickening of his heart-beats, that instinctively she moved near him. She spoke quickly as her father came up as if to ward off some obnoxious catechism. "Father, this is Mr. Armitage. I knew him in the city."

Armitage, about to put out his hand, checked himself as he realized that this revert to the age of the cave-dwellers had no intention of coöperating in any such courtesy. He contented himself with saying, "How do you do, Mr. Ayres," and standing very straight.

Ayres acknowledged the young man's interest in his health by a grunt which confirmed his resemblance to a being of a prehistoric race. Then he turned his close-set eyes on his daughter. "Ain't it rather early to be leaving your work for this philandering?"

"My work is finished, father, except for getting supper. Otherwise I shouldn't be here." Cynthia spoke with a ring of courage which rightly or wrongly, Armitage attributed to his presence. "And supper will be ready at six o'clock," she added.

"Have it ready at six, but that's not saying I'll be ready. I've got some things to look after. I may be 'round at six or seven or eight or nine. Depends on what I find to do." He turned his back on them ostentatiously, and without again looking in their direction, stamped his way back to his horse and drove to the barn.

Armitage glancing at Cynthia, saw she was trembling. Her emotion seemed to him unreasonable. His own mood was one of pure exasperation. "Confound it," he exclaimed irritably. "Why

couldn't your father have stayed away another hour? Why did he have to break in on the first talk I've had with you since I came?"

She gave him one of those direct glances he remembered. "The first and the last," she said.

"Why the last?"

"Because you must be leaving very soon."

"Thanks, my dear girl. I've no pressing engagement that I know of."

"Listen, Mr. Armitage." Something in her manner suggested that her complaisance in the matter of coming out for a talk had been due to her having something she especially wished to say to him. And in consequence his mouth took on a grimness which his mother would have recognized as indicating his most obstinate mood, in which argument and appeal were powerless to change him. But Cynthia did not look in his direction and hurried on unwarned.

"Don't think I'm not grateful. It was wonderful for you to come here, just to find out about those letters. I was hurt at not hearing from you—terribly. I said in that letter, you know, that your friendship—" Her voice shook, then steadied as she swung to a topic less intimate. "It's very strange about those letters. I can't understand—"

"There's only one explanation, of course. They were intercepted."

She pondered his statement and her eyes were

anxious. "Do you mean Randall? I really don't think—"

"Randall! Good Lord," he protested, shocked at the lukewarmness of her defense. "He isn't any more capable of such a thing than I am."

"Well, I doubt if he is. But still—"

"Look here, you don't do Randall justice," he insisted. "We'll straighten this out before we go on." Without further preface he told her of Randall's letter. And it gratified his sex loyalty to see, as he finished, the tears welling up in her eyes.

"Poor Randall. How good of him."

"It was white," Armitage agreed with enthusiasm. "He's really a kid—I don't know how old he is—I mean he's undeveloped. But he has the making of a he-man just the same."

"After you go back—and you really must go soon you know—you had better take advantage of Randall's offer and send your letters in his care."

"Why all this insistence on my early departure, Cynthia? It's not at all complimentary."

He was sure that her answer was not to be attuned to the lightness of his question. Her beautiful eyes reflected gravity. But almost as she started to speak she was interrupted. Somewhere a clock began to strike. The bell was deep-toned and musical. The resonant strokes were deliberate, suggesting to Armitage the tolling of a church bell. For some

reason it seemed impossible to continue the conversation while the clock was striking. He listened, counting the strokes aloud. One—two—three—four—five!

"Twenty minutes fast," said Armitage consulting his watch. "I didn't realize that old clock of yours was running. Don't tell me it's been striking for a week and I've never noticed it before. Wonderful tone. Sounds as if it were trying to impress the listener with the brevity of all things."

He looked for Cynthia's approval of his fancy, and stared incredulous at her altered face, from which some inexplicable emotion had drained every drop of blood. Meeting his eyes, she made an effort to answer his question.

"No, it's not been running—since I was born. We keep it—it's very old."

"Why, of course," he said, vaguely distressed by her mysterious agitation. "Those old chaps did everything better than we can, didn't they? That bell now. Such a clock ought really to be put in shape, don't you know. I imagine Susan thinks so too, and she's been tinkering with it, trying to get it going."

Cynthia started to her feet. He had a curious certainty that his suggestion had relieved the tension of her nerves.

"Susan mustn't meddle," she said hurriedly.

She might injure it, and it's the only thing we have that's of any value." She ran to the house ahead of him, and Armitage followed with dignified deliberation, annoyed at the interruption to their talk, yet dimly aware that even if he had been able to detain her, the spell had been broken by the inopportune striking of the old clock.

Susan was not the culprit. A glance told as much. Shivering and white, she showed Cynthia's inexplicable terror many times magnified.

"I never went near it," she gasped. "I didn't move nor nothing. It up and struck its own self. I never went near it."

"Well, what of it?" Armitage demanded. "What are you scared about? You don't think because the clock has struck, it's going to give you a good drubbing, do you?"

Susan's answer to this banality was an unbelieving stare.

"Don't you know?" she asked, after assuring herself that his gaiety was not fictitious. "It's a warning."

"Warning of what? That's you've got to get up at five tomorrow morning?"

The Susan who shrieked ecstatically over his least witticism now looked at him appalled. "Sh! It means somebody's going to die. Doesn't it, Kizzie?"

Armitage glanced at Cynthia, and not discerning in her face the amusement he expected to see, exploded in a laugh. "Upon my word," he cried. "You two superstitious geese! Susan, I'm ashamed of you for not setting your older sister a better example."

"Those superstitions *are* silly," Cynthia owned, her color coming back. "Of course there's no possible connection. But it's rather startling to hear a clock begin striking when it hasn't been running for twenty five years or so. I know it stopped some years before I was born."

Armitage obligingly conceded it was startling, and looked with fresh interest at the face of the old clock, the hands pointing to twenty minutes of twelve. For a quarter of a century they had been pointing thus, commemorating a forgotten moment. Men and women to whom that moment had meant the consummation of life, success, love's ecstacy, or perhaps heart-break, had passed from vigorous maturity to old age or death. Children born when those hands, creeping through slow and dreadful hours, had reached this point, now saw their children around them. But the face of the old clock was unchanged, the hands pointing as they had pointed before the century came into being, loyal to a dead moment.

One—two—three—four—five!

CHAPTER XIII

THE NEST IS ABANDONED

Some days passed before Armitage had opportunity to confirm his first unfavorable impression of the gentleman he had selected from over a hundred million fellow-citizens for the honorable post of father-in-law. As happens in politics occasionally, his selection had been due to motives of policy rather than to his preëminent fitness for the place. Armitage realized with pained surprise that a man is almost as helpless in acquiring his relatives by marriage as his kindred by blood. You fell in love with a girl, and there you were. It made no difference that her father was a dead ringer for the prehistoric man, and her sister resembled a gargoyle.

It was on a Monday that Armitage had had the pleasure of making Ayres' acquaintance, and it was Saturday before he saw him again, under very different circumstances. The days between had been singularly unsatisfactory from the young man's point of view. Each time he left her, Cynthia seemed bent on bidding him not goodnight, but goodbye, and when he made his appearance the next day, she greeted him invariably with the same regretful

surprise. She refused to take advantage of the baby's evident improvement to go for a drive or a walk, or even to sit out of doors on the shady side of the house, as she had done on one memorable occasion. She consistently steered the conversation away from personalities. Unintentionally Armitage had let drop the fact that Anne Rossiter had been his mother's guest for the summer, and Cynthia had developed a disconcerting tendency to drag Anne into the conversation. When Armitage presented himself at the house on Saturday morning, his mood was unamiable and obstinate.

But a moment indoors was enough to efface his sense of grievance. For the baby was worse, appallingly worse. Neither Cynthia nor Susan had been in bed during the night and the faces of both were haggard with fatigue. The breakfast dishes stood unwashed on the table that had been set for one. For once the day's work was forgotten, while two distracted girls hung over the cradle where a blue-lipped atom of humanity fought the grim fight which sooner or later ends in defeat.

"I'll go for the doctor and bring him at once," Armitage said, and Cynthia answered with a glance of such poignant gratitude that he felt the smart of tears in his eyes. "What if you'd taken me at my word and gone yesterday," she breathed, as if thinking aloud.

"You're not going to get rid of me as easily as that," the young man retorted, and ran to his car. He found the doctor at his breakfast, just back from an all-night vigil with a very sick patient at an out-lying farmhouse, and inclined to resent his caller's peremptory manner.

"I'll give you some medicine to take back, and I'll come myself when I can. But I must get some sleep. Beside I'm afraid it's no use. I've felt from the first that the case was hopeless. The child came into the world with everything against him. Mother's vitality utterly exhausted. The oldest girl's going to wear herself out the same way."

Armitage had his own reasons for thinking him mistaken, but he waived that point in his determination to persuade the doctor to postpone his nap in favor of an automobile drive. The doctor grinned satirically when promised that he would be deposited at the Ayres' door in ten minutes, with another ten for the return trip.

"Thanks! I'll take a little longer, if you don't mind, so as to be reasonably sure that I won't arrive in small pieces. I suppose there's no use trying to get out of it till afternoon."

"Not a particle, Doc," Armitage assured him joyfully and carried off the bullied professional man, reduced to unprotesting tameness by the sheer audacity and boyish spirits of his junior.

On the way he spoke of Ayres. "Queer unhuman creature. Doesn't seem really a man, and it would be an insult to my dog to call him a brute."

"I saw him for the first time the other day," said Armitage. "He was in a bad humor, I imagine, and he positively bristled. I looked at him and said to myself, 'The Neanderthal man.' It was a wonder I didn't shout it."

"The first time his daughter called me to attend the baby," said the doctor, without commenting on the aptness of the phrase, "he was very much worked up over the expense. Came to see me and said he'd pay for that one visit, but not for another. From what he let drop, I imagine he thought the child wouldn't live anyway, and there wasn't any sense squandering good money on him. Of course I told him to go to the devil—"

"Doctor," Armitage interrupted, "if you can save that child by devoting yourself to him, go ahead and send me the bill."

The doctor bridled. "Young man, I don't need the assurance that I'm going to get my money to induce me to do my best to save a life."

"That's all right. But if there's anything outside the regular routine that could be tried—a new treatment—a consultation—"

The doctor shook his head, sighing. "The case is only too simple, I'm afraid." Then he regarded his

chauffeur attentively, a gleam of humor in his tired eyes. "You're interested in Better Babies, I see."

"I'm interested in the sister of this particular baby," Armitage owned bluntly.

"Good boy!" The doctor patted the young man's knee. "Keziah is a fine girl, an unusual girl. Her mother was a nice little woman, but she doesn't solve the riddle of Keziah. Such things make it easier to believe in the first chapter of Genesis—or is it the second? It gives a fellow the feeling that every now and then, not satisfied with the way we're evolving ourselves, the great Potter puts His hand again to the clay and leaves His thumb print. Heredity doesn't explain Keziah. You have to explain her as you explain Eve."

They were at the Ayres' door-step as the doctor finished. Armitage held up his watch with a grin of triumph. "Nine minutes and three-quarters," he said. "And you never knew it."

The drive back was distinctly less cheerful. The doctor had stayed some time. "Not that I could do anything," he told Armitage on the return, "but it's a comfort to people at such times to have a doctor standing around, and they've no way of knowing what a hopeless ass he feels. Have you ever thought of studying medicine?"

"Why, no, I never have."

"That's right. Do anything else. Paint signs,

Run a street car. The ideal physician would be our friend Ayres, plus brains—a splendid animal, a keen mentality, but no heart. No heart! To have women looking up at you, as that girl looked just now, as though you were God and could work miracles, it's—well, it's tough on the man with sensibilities."

"There's one thing your ideal physician would miss, Doctor," said Armitage, immensely drawn to this country practitioner, with his shabby coat and tired eyes. "If a woman looked as Mary did, when Lazarus came out of the tomb, he wouldn't feel a thrill. There are compensations, after all, for being human."

"I'll be in again during the day," said the doctor as he alighted at his own door. "Not that it will do any good. But I've got to get some sleep before I'll be much good to anybody. I'm fairly groggy. Much obliged, Mr.—"

"Armitage is my name."

"Much obliged, Mr. Armitage. Drop in some evening if you find yourself in the village on a night when there's no movie show. I hope I'll be at home. It's not often I get a chance at what I call conversation."

Armitage beat his own record in returning to the Ayres' farm, and on his arrival he took command. He made coffee and toast, and forced the weary girls to eat and drink. When he suggested sleep, he

found them less tractable, and he yielded the point at last, and contented himself with putting them into the most comfortable chairs the house afforded, robbing the beds upstairs of pillows to tuck around them.

All day they watched and waited. The doctor came in the afternoon looking more tired than before, after his insufficient sleep. He too, waited for a while, watched with the understanding eye of one to whom death is an old story, and went away heavily at length, after changing a medicine. Not that the change would matter but because of something vaguely comforting in a change of medicine, as if it proved hope not quite abandoned.

The hours dragged on. Susan worn out, fell asleep in her chair, snoring a little, jerkily, her mouth ajar, looking in her sleep fantastically ill-favored. The baby too, slept with his blue lips parted, his breath coming faintly. Armitage watching him was conscious chiefly of astonished resentment.

Waste! Wanton waste! He had often thought the same on the battle front, but there it was humanity he accused. The masterpicce of the ages, man with his miraculous body and audacious brain, mangled, destroyed. Thousands of them, millions of them, blown to atoms, choked by gas, dying in torment of wounds. But there it was humanity run

mad, doing itself to death, like a frenzied wolf, whose fangs rip open its own bowels.

This was different. This was Nature's doings. The little body, built up painstakingly cell by cell, through crawling months, was never to develop. This machine, made to run seventy years at the least, was stopping under half a year. The life which had cost a life was going out like a candle in the wind. All that love could do, all that science could do was impotent. He stared at the dying child with a strange tumult of feeling, as if death had been a novelty in his experience. Waste! Awful, incomprehensible waste—unless, indeed, death were another name for life.

The baby's breathing became louder. "Don't you think he needs more air?" appealed Cynthia, her lips trembling over the question. "The cradle shuts the breeze away."

They lifted the pillow on which the child lay, and placed it on the old-fashioned horse-hair couch between the windows. Cynthia covered him carefully, explaining that his fingers were cold. She slipped her hand under the cover, to lend the warmth of her vitality to the tiny fingers that never would be warm again. Armitage thought she had never been so beautiful. She sat with her pale profile toward him, her look of suffering tenderness etherealizing her features, till she seemed a creature compounded of

elements less gross than flesh and blood, virgin, and yet Mater Dolorosa. His young passion shrank back abashed. He forgot his love in a reverence that was almost awe.

The baby's breathing was noticeably more difficult. "I wonder if it would be safe to give him the drops again," said Cynthia, looking up at the tall, silent young man, standing beside her. "How long is it since we gave the last?"

Armitage consulted his watch. "It's just twenty minutes of five now, and the last drops—"

A cry from Cynthia interrupted him. The baby had thrown up his little arms, fighting for his breath.

"The doctor! O, bring the doctor quick."

But instead of hurrying to obey, Armitage moved to Cynthia's side and put his arm about her. And in an instant she saw what he had seen, the change which even to Eve hanging over the body of the dead Abel, must have meant the end—or else a beginning. "You question my very existence," says the departing spirit, "yet what is left when I am gone? You have the body you worship, with all its members complete, but now it is only a husk to be thrown out, only a worthless garment to cast aside. I was its strength and its glory, and when I go, I take all that matters with me."

Armitage looking down at the waxen face felt himself shaken by a sudden overpowering convic-

tion of immortality. It was not that a machine had stopped. Something had taken flight. Only the nest was left. The winged occupant was already away.

A faint wailing cry came from Cynthia's lips. Susan started up blinking, and then was instantly awake, answering her sister's cry with another, "Oh baby! baby!"

Armitage's watch was still in his hand. Twenty minutes of five. And then he remembered the striking of the old clock, five days before. Again its deliberate, musical strokes reverberated through his consciousness.

One—two—three—four—five!

CHAPTER XIV

THE NEANDERTHAL MAN

At the rear of the house a door opened and shut. It slammed to with a vindictive violence that shook the room. Breaking in on the reverent hush of the moment it was an abhorrent sound, full of indescribable menace like the grinding roar of an earthquake. And hard upon the slam, came the sound of heavy feet stamping their way through the stillness.

The arm about Cynthia's shoulders dropped automatically. Armitage's watch went back into his pocket. He faced about in the direction of the advancing footsteps, nerves and muscles alike tense.

His confused intention of offering an explanation that would forestall Ayres' criticism, was frustrated by the fact that Cynthia's father opened a volley of abuse before he became visible. The sight of the table in the kitchen, standing just as he had left it on finishing breakfast, roused his ire.

"What the devil's this? Not a stroke of work done in this kitchen all day. Susan, you damned lazy jade, get a move on. And Keziah, I'm ready for my supper. D'ye hear? I'm ready for my supper."

He loomed big in the doorway, as he finished, his broad face red with rage. Armitage stepped toward him quickly. "Mr. Ayres," he began.

A roar of fury cut him short. "Why, you damned pie-faced dude," Ayres bellowed, "You here again? I thought I showed you plain enough the other day that I didn't care for your comp'ny. Now chase out in a hurry before you get kicked out."

To answer an ear-splitting insult in a voice attuned to conversational pitch is a triumph of self-control. Yet Armitage achieved it. "Mr. Ayres," he repeated quietly, "I am sorry to tell you that your son has just died."

"Eh? What?" He stared stupidly, then looked beyond Armitage to the motionless little figure on the couch. "You mean the kid?"

Something in his intonation tightened Armitage's fingers into a fist, but he set his teeth grimly, barring the way of the retort that sprang to his lips. With the same note of contempt in his voice, the father of the dead child went on, "Well, if he *is* dead, it's nothing surprising. Been looking for it every day, haven't we? There's no sense in everything's being upset just for that. T'ain't likely he'd have been worth much even if we had raised him. And all this expense—just a waste of money. If you ask me, I say it's a damn good thing."

As he presented his eminently reasonable view,

his voice lost its stridency. His tone as he ended was almost amiable. But his listeners were not long to enjoy the unique phenomenon, for as he finished, Armitage stepped forward, and slapped him lightly across the mouth.

Consternation was an instantaneous sequel of the act. He was not afraid of Cynthia's father for all his bulk, nor averse to fighting him, but a brutal struggle in the presence of that tiny shape, now clothed with death's mysterious dignity, was desecration. But while he was conscious only of a regretful dismay, some sub-conscious intelligence took him in charge and jerked him out of the reach of the astonished giant.

It was well for Armitage that his backward leap had been quicker than his thought, for the paralysis of Ayres' wits, due to the over-throw of a life-long conviction that every man was afraid of him, was of the briefest duration. As he realized the affront put upon him by this audacious youth, he screamed like a maddened stallion, and rushed forward. A table stood between him and his goal, and it went over with a crash, an oil lamp that stood upon it breaking, and the contents of Cynthia's work-basket scattering about the room.

It was an easy matter for Armitage to get the first blow. Strategy was foreign to Ayres' temperament. Fear was an unknown emotion. His

one thought was to annihilate the first man who had ever dared pick a fight with him. His headlong fury gave Armitage an advantage he was not slow to improve. As his knuckles came in contact with that brutal jaw, he knew for the first time the ecstasy of conflict.

They fought over the death chamber inconclusively, advancing, retreating, striking, parrying. One piece of furniture after another went down. Armitage heard the grind of broken glass under his heel. His mood was curiously vacillating. Now he felt the sheer joy of the fight, as if he had been another cave man, measuring himself against a hated foe, prepared to fight till he killed or was killed. And again he was oppressed by the thought of sacrilege, and the eyes of the dead child seemed gazing at him reproachfully. But he forgot his qualms when his fist, backed by every ounce of energy in his lithe body, crashed against Ayres' nose. The blood spurted out, dying the black beard below. Armitage was not quite sure, but he had the impression that he laughed aloud.

The odds were in his favor, he believed, while he kept out of the reach of those huge arms and thick muscular fingers. For no Marquis of Queensbury rules were recognized in this extempore prize-ring. Ayres lusted to kill. He would have throttled the younger man, if he could have gripped

his throat. He would joyously have gouged out his eyes. He was as ready to use his teeth as his fists. Unhesitatingly he would have stamped the life out of Armitage's prostrate body.

But apart from Ayres' tremendous strength, and absolute unscrupulousness, the advantage was with Armitage. He was younger, and youth tells. Already Ayres' breathing was like the exhaust of an engine. Thanks to his army drill, Armitage's boxing was more scientific. He told himself that if he kept his head and took his time, he must win. But his scruples were against him. To his horror he found himself backing toward the couch where lay the body of the dead child. Instantly his imagination pictured the couch overturned as the table had been, the waxen little form stamped underfoot like the broken glass. The vividness of the picture distracted his attention, and his spring to the side was not quite quick enough. Ayres' big fist smashed into his face with a force that sent him staggering back to the opposite wall. But he rallied instantly, and as his frenzied opponent rushed upon him, his blow went home just below the heart. Had he followed up his advantage, he might have ended the fight then and there, for his adversary reeled back, groaning, on the point of collapse. The moment he wheezed and tottered was long enough for a knock-out blow.

But that decisive moment, Armitage made no move, and then snarling like a dog, Ayres was at him again. This time both men were wary, and they fought on indeterminately, exchanging ineffective blows. Ayres' stertorous breathing sounded loud above the shuffling of feet and the occasional crunching of a bit of glass under the heel. "He can't last much longer," Armitage told himself. "One or two good clips will finish him."

As the thought crossed his mind he went down striking the back of his head with such force that he was momentarily stunned. In a quick side-step, he had set his foot on a button from Cynthia's work-basket, round as a marble and as effective as the pebble in David's sling. But in this instance, the giant was not the sufferer.

With an exultant scream, Ayres flung himself on the fallen man. He caught Armitage's right arm, and bent the fore-arm back, throwing his weight upon it. The bone snapped with an audible report. Then flinging aside the useless limb, Ayres reached for his throat.

But his adversary's brief unconsciousness had thrown Ayres off his guard, and his over-confidence was to cost him dear. Before his iron fingers could close about the young man's wind pipe, Armitage with serpentine quickness, had writhed to one side, his body jerking erect like a jack-in-the-box. His

left arm, always his chief dependence, though it had been tied behind his back so much of his youth, shot out, nerved by desperation, and cracked like a mallet against Ayres' temple. The colossal arm quivered, the eyes protruded, the big body swayed uncertainly. Then Armitage's left swung again, and Ayres dropped with a grunt.

Slowly the victor dragged himself to his feet. His right arm hung useless at his side. His face was swelling rapidly. Already one eye was almost closed. He looked to see signs that his fallen enemy had not had enough, but he failed to see signs of life, even.

He turned himself slowly. Over on the couch lay the dead baby. In the next room he could see Susan sprawling on the floor, face up, as if she too had fallen dead. But by the door Cynthia stood upright, immobile, facing him with illumined eyes. Her cheeks were aflame. She held her head proudly. At that moment she looked the incarnate spirit of victory.

He moved toward her, limping painfully. He had cut himself on a bit of broken glass, and the blood was running down his cheek. "I'm not sure but I've killed your father," he said.

"He would have killed you if he could," she replied composedly.

He looked toward the supine figure in the next

room, and got out the word "Susan?" with an interrogative tilt.

"She's only fainted. She faints easily. I'll attend to her presently. But first can't I do something for you?"

She spoke as calmly as if they were exchanging courtesies at some social function. He stared at her without replying, and she repeated the question.

"No—no, thank you. I'll have to see the doctor anyway. My arm's broken, you know. He might as well do it all." He glanced back over his shoulder at Ayres' motionless figure. "Can I really have killed him?" he wondered, his voice seeming to come from a distance. "I didn't mean that."

"He was trying to kill you," she consoled him, as if soothing a troubled child. And then with a change of voice, "But he couldn't have done that. I wouldn't have let him."

She lifted her right arm which had hung straight by her side, and he saw that her hand gripped a hammer. He fell back against the jamb of the door for support. She had given him every chance to save himself, he realized, but if Ayres' fingers had once fastened on his throat, the giant's skull would have been cracked by a blow from the rear. "Cynthia," he stammered, "thank God you didn't use it."

She dropped the hammer and stepped lightly to his side. She flung her arms about his neck, lifting

her enkindled face and kissing him fiercely on his bruised lips. Still clinging, she turned to glance at the inert heap on the floor.

"I think his hand moved," she said. "You had better go." Again she pressed her lips to his, and pushed him to the door.

Armitage went out staggering, climbed into his car and driving with one hand, reached the road without accident. At the end of the drive, he encountered Randall Baird.

It was still light enough to see, and Randall reined up his horses. "God Almighty!" he exploded after a look at Armitage's face.

"Baird," the other said, speaking with difficulty, "I'm glad I met you. I've had a fight with Ayres—"

Randall threw the lines on his horses' backs and leaped over the wheel. "What's that?" he shouted. "Say it again."

He was standing on the running board, trembling with excitement. With even more difficulty, for his lips were swelling fast, and felt clumsy and in the way, Armitage repeated, "I've had a fight with Ayres and knocked him out."

Randall's yell resembled an Apache war-whoop. He leaned into the car, as if to emulate Cynthia's precedent. Armitage shrank away. "Look out! That arm's broken."

"Geewhittiker! And you licked him!"

"I'm not sure but what I've killed him. I took a chance. When a man's on top of you and clawing for your throat, you hit where you can."

"Oh glory!" Randall hugged himself in an ecstasy.

"Go on to the house," Armitage ordered. "Cynthia needs you. Whether her father is dead or not, the baby is. And if the old man doesn't come to, and they want me, they'll find me at Nesbitts'."

"Not much," Randall whooped. "You go on home and tell the folks you've licked Ayres. You'll own everything in the house. There won't nothing be too good for you, nothing will be any trouble. Ma'll spend all her spare time fixing up things she thinks will taste good, and believe me, you'll need something better than the grubb at Nesbitt's before your arm's knit. Dad'll get the doctor for you, and 'tend to everything you want done. Just tell 'em I sent you. But tell 'em first you fought Ayres and knocked him out."

And Armitage, directing his car toward the Baird farm, no easy matter for a man whose right arm is hanging helpless, heard the beat of hoofs as Randall lashed his horses up the drive.

CHAPTER XV

WHEN A WOMAN WILL

For a full week Armitage tasted the sweets of invalidism. He was surprised to find it so easy to enact the role of a wounded hero. Though victor in the fight, he found his disabilities serious enough to render inaction agreeable, and his rather hard bed seemed satisfyingly luxurious. It was not in human nature, moreover, to be indifferent to the worshipful attitude of the simple household in which he had found a haven. Randall had not exaggerated the potency of the news that he had "licked" Ayres. It had been a password, admitting him to family intimacy.

Through Mrs. Baird and her son, Armitage was kept informed as to the passage of events in Cynthia's home. When Randall had hurried to her aid the night of the baby's death, he had found Ayres sitting up, but with his head fallen on his chest, apparently oblivious to the scene of devastation about him. Nor had he moved while Randall and Cynthia did what they could to restore the ghastly room to some semblance of order before summoning the undertaker.

"He's quicker at cussing you out than he is at thinking, old Ayres is," Randall declared. "I reckon he's still trying to figure out how the devil he came on the floor."

Even at the funeral, according to Armitage's informants, Ayres had seemed half dazed. "You know how some folks seem when they've just waked up," said Mrs. Baird, "not just sure where they are—not sure of anything. That's the way he acted. Keziah made Susan give his sleeve a twitch when t'was time for him to go out to the carriage. It looked to me like Keziah couldn't bring herself to so much as touch him, any more'n if he'd been a snake."

"How did Cyn—Keziah, seem?" asked Armitage.

Mrs. Baird exchanged glances with her son. Randall's brows knitted in a troubled frown as he left his mother to explain.

"There's something queer about Keziah, too," Mrs. Baird owned, "though you can't just put your finger on it. She's dreadful quiet and low spoken for one thing, and that worries me. When folks cry and carry on, like Susan does, you can feel easy about 'em, for then their trouble's working off the natural way. But when they act just the same as usual, you know something queer is going on in their insides, and there's no telling where it'll end."

Randall's daily report, corroborated his mother's

judgment. Forgetting that he was confiding in a rival, he displayed the natural irritation of a perplexed lover. "It's worse than it was when the baby was sick. Then she acted as if she didn't know you were around. And she acts the same way now, only it makes you feel queerer than it did. When she looks at you, it's like she's looking right through you, underclothes and all, to something behind your back, and it's doggone funny."

At the beginning of the second week of his convalescence, Armitage guiltily recalled his filial obligations. He had not written his mother since their chilly parting. After assuring her that he would not be gone a week, he had remained away over three, with no prospect of immediate return. Ross knew his conduct had been shabby, but when relying on his useful left hand, he set himself to write her, there seemed insurmountable obstacles in the way of frankness. He wished to enlist her sympathies in Cynthia's behalf, but he shrank from describing Cynthia's family circle, her brutal father, her kindly, commonplace little sister. He referred briefly to the baby's death, but omitted all mention of the conflict that followed hard upon it, and of his resulting injuries. In short, while his mood was serious, his letter was flippant; while he yearned for her sympathy, he gave the impression of jaunty self-sufficiency. And when he added a postscript,

"Give my love to Anne," he was immediately aware his mother would consider the commission in the worst possible taste. As he folded the rather brief communication, and inserted it in a yellow envelope Randall had furnished him, he sighed over the realization that his letter would irritate his mother more than it would please her, and then sighed again with relief, because, for good or ill, the thing was done.

The answer came four days later. He read it through with growing amazement. It was a letter from his mother, and yet a letter from a stranger, a stern, implacable personality which had usurped the place of the indulgent and tender friend who had been his comrade and counsellor since he could remember. It is a truism that we know our closest intimates only superficially, but this truth was brought home to Armitage with a poignancy of realization that left a sting.

"Dear Ross:

"Your letter has just reached me and I find it difficult to believe that it was written by a son of mine. You have defied my wishes, treated my guest with discourtesy, and broken your word, yet I can discover in your letter no suggestion of regret nor apology, only a series of flippant banalities.

"You are the victim, it is plain, of one of those infatuations which ocasionally obsess young men of birth and breeding, when a pretty face temporarily obscures all standards. The possibility of your finding happiness with the girl we met on the train

five years ago, even though by a superficial culture she has been able to disguise her natural commonness, is too remote to consider seriously. Nothing is more short lived than passion apart from congeniality.

"You have already made it plain that in this matter my wishes weigh nothing with you. I shall try to make equally plain the consequences of your folly, provided you persist in this insane course. As you are aware your father left me everything for the term of my life, and while it has been my great happiness to share my income with you, I have no intention of devoting it to the support of a rustic daughter-in-law, and her unwelcome children. I will further remind you, that though in time you will inherit all I have, I am only fifty-four years of age, and in excellent health, with every prospect and intention of living at least twenty years longer.

"If you marry this girl, Ross, you make yourself responsible for her support and your own. Though my wishes have no influence with you, possibly the instinct of self-preservation may come to your rescue in time to save you from a step that would mean your ruin.

"Your unhappy mother,
"Emma Wentworth Armitage."

Ross read the letter over twice with a growing sense of grievance. This was his mother, but a mother he had never known. He felt the desolate loneliness of a lost child. He could have cried from the sheer hurt of it. Yet it was evident that Mrs. Armitage knew her son as little as he knew her. The threat gave bone and sinew to his vague

purpose. He had the profound conviction common to young Americans, of his ability to take care of himself, and the prospect of waiting twenty years for a share in his inheritance awakened no apprehension.

To strengthen his assurance, he possessed a few thousand dollars in his own right, the bequest of a great-aunt, which thanks to his mother's generosity, he had never touched. With this to depend on till he was established in business, his decision was inevitable, to ask Cynthia to marry him at once. He resolved to answer his mother's letter by sending her the announcement of his marriage.

Considering the circumstances under which he had taken leave of Cynthia's father, Armitage felt a delicacy in again crossing the threshold. He resolved to send Cynthia a message by Randall, asking her to meet him at some spot, sufficiently secluded for a proposal of marriage and for the sequel contingent on an acceptance. And Armitage was counting confidently on being accepted. Considering everything, this was no conceit on his part, but his assurance was based not so much on his obvious advantages, as on the recollection of his last parting with Cynthia. A thousand times since he had closed his eyes and concentrated his thought on reliving the moment when she had kissed him. He saw again her uplifted face, her kindling eyes, and

felt the pressure of her hot lips on his, his pulse throbbing feverishly with every rehearsal of that supreme moment. While the memory remained so vivid, he could not doubt what Cynthia's answer would be.

Randall backslid from his attitude of hero-worship when asked to act the role of Cupid's messenger. He glared at the note Armitage had handed him unsealed, and then glared at the writer. "What are you saying to her that's so durned private you've got to write it?"

"It's not especially private. I want to see her, that's all. You can read the note if you like."

"What would I want to read your letter for?" Randall shouted. "It don't cut any ice with me what you say in your letters to her. You can make love to her as hard as you gol-durn please, and ask me to carry it to her—"

"There's no love making in that letter, Randall. You can read it for yourself—"

"Oh damn it!" Randall fairly stamped in his exasperation. "You couldn't *pay* me to read your letter. It ain't nothing to me what you say or what you don't say. I'll take it all right, but all I've got to say is you've got your nerve with you."

"Reckon I have, old man. But unluckily I haven't any other messenger. If you'll send me a boy—"

"I told you I'd take it, didn't I?" Randall roared, as he slammed out of the room, and five minutes later Mrs. Baird brought up a cup of chicken broth, and insisted on the convalescent's taking it forthwith. As Armitage sipped the savory concoction, she busied herself with quite unnecessary tasks about the room, and finally brought herself to mention her real errand. "Randall's hasty in his way, but he don't mean nothing by it."

"Mrs. Baird, I think Randall is one of the finest fellows living."

"Well, now, Mr. Armitage," beamed the mother, "that's nice of you to say. And Randall thinks everything of you, too, only of course where Keziah's concerned, he's a mite unreasonable. He's different from most boys, Randall is. There's never been but one girl for him, and that's Keziah Ayres, and I must say she might do worse than to have him."

"I think it's likely that she'll do very much worse," Armitage answered cheerily, and Mrs. Baird carried off the empty cup, evidently uncertain how to regard that admission.

Had Randall dictated Cynthia's reply, it could hardly have been more to his liking. Armitage read it with frowning perplexity, unable to reconcile this message with the memory of his last glimpse of her.

"Dear Mr. Armitage:

"You must not try to see me again. O, take my word for it, that this is better. We shall only make things hard for each other. And when you go home, you had better not write me any more. You have one sort of life to live and I another, and there is nothing in common between the two. God bless you."

The note had no signature but he knew instinctively that had she written her name, she would have called herself Keziah. His manner quite matter-of-fact, Armitage addressed his scowling messenger. "Randall, I'm afraid I've got to trouble you again."

Randall instantly exploded. "If you think I'm a doggoned postman—"

"I don't. A postman wouldn't be quick enough for me. And I've got to see that girl, Randall. She's turned me down cold. She says for me to go back to the city and quit bothering her."

Randall stared at the rueful face of his guest, then grinned jubilantly. "Ain't girls the devil?"

"Well, rather! But I ask you to put yourself in my place. You know I can't go away without seeing her, and I won't go away without seeing her. After what happened my last call, it's hardly decent for me to show my face at the house. And so she'll have to come to me."

Randall's suggestion was offered with an air of

finding a triumphant solution to the problem. "Maybe it would be a good idea for you to go on home, and then write her a nice letter."

"She's shut down on my letters, too. Says she doesn't want to hear from me."

"You don't say." Randall's joy was with difficulty disguised as sympathy. "Tough luck," he commented buoyantly. "Well, if you want to send her another letter, I'll take it, but maybe it would be just as well if you let her alone for a spell. That's the best medicine for a girl who is too high and mighty."

Armitage accepted Randall's aid while ignoring his advice, as is the way of the world. His second communication to Cynthia was as terse as a telegram.

"Must see you. Name time and place. unless you prefer to have me call at your home."

Randall's air was complacent when he brought Cynthia's reply. "There's your answer. I don't know what she said, but she looked mighty glum when she wrote it, so I guess it's nothing that'll please you." He studied Armitage's impassive face, and then, as having finished his reading, he slipped the note into his pocket, Randall inquired airily, "Well, what luck did you have this time?"

"She's going to see me tomorrow."

"She is!" Randall's chagrin was beyond con-

cealment. "Well, I'll be gol-durned," he said with feeling, "and when she read your letter and all the time she was writing, she looked as if she could chew nails. It's sure the devil to know what a girl really means."

"Perhaps," suggested Armitage jauntily, "she thinks this will be the easiest way to get rid of me." And for all the assurance of his manner, the contents of Cynthia's note had given plausible ground for the suggestion. Nothing in the impatiently scribbled lines was of a nature to gratify his vanity.

"Since you insist on seeing me, and it is out of the question for you to come here, I will meet you at three o'clock tomorrow at the foot of the big pine near Murray's pond. I will be there at three, but I shall be so glad if I do not find you waiting for me, if by that time you are on your way home. Dear Mr. Armitage, why make things needlessly difficult for us both? Our friendship has been a mistake from the beginning. Don't try to see me again. Don't write me again. Go back to your mother and the people to whom you belong and forget Keziah Ayres."

Armitage was at the rendezvous she had appointed half an hour early. Too impatient to be quiet, he strolled about, awaiting Cynthia's arrival, and confidence grew with every breath. The autumn woods were gorgeous, patches of red flaring out angrily amid the russet brown, luscious yellows,

suggesting juicy fruit, and the steadfast green of the pines, proclaiming superiority to the changes of the seasons. The tang in the air was like a heady wine. Armitage kicked aside the fallen leaves with boyish pleasure in their protesting rustle, whistled the melody of an old love song, and felt himself master of the situation.

She came through the woods and took him by surprise, for he was watching the road. The fallen leaves betrayed her, and he turned with leaping pulses to find her close to him. She was dressed in the self same blue serge she had worn to his mother's tea, and the hat whose shabbiness had troubled her on that great occasion, but her face was paler than the face he remembered, and her grey eyes looked bigger, and were feverishly brilliant. He remembered that they had parted with a kiss, and he sprang toward her with a reasonable intention of beginning where they had left off.

Cynthia divined his purpose and stopped short, her attitude so antagonistic that he too, came to a jerky halt. "Mr. Armitage," she said in a voice that shook, despite her gallant efforts to hold it steady, "I have come here against my wish and better judgment. I ask you not to make me sorry."

For an instant his confidence was chilled as if a breath of the coming winter had blown through the October woods. But the impression had come and

"'I DEFY YOU TO LOOK IN MY EYES AND TELL ME YOU DON'T LOVE ME.'"

gone before he had time to analyze it. He laughed jubilantly. "Make you sorry," he repeated. "Why, I had the vanity to think you would be almost as glad to see me as I am to see you. Come over to this fallen log and sit beside me, Cynthia. This day was made for lovers."

"Oh hush," she begged, tears in her voice, but she walked beside him to the log he had indicated. As she seated herself he realized that she was trembling, that underneath her rigid self-control, tumultuous emotions fought for expression, and this knowledge made his avowal easy.

"Cynthia dear," he burst out. "What's the use of beating about the bush? I love you. I want you. Marry me, dearest. Make me the happiest man in the world, and let me do my best to make you the happiest woman."

He snatched her hand and the icy chill of it struck him again with a sense of foreboding. He kissed it, and the incongruous thought crossed his mind that it was like kissing the hand of a dead woman. Then he heard her voice, sounding faint and far away, "I can't marry you."

"You mean you don't love me? That's a lie. You do. I swear you love me. You kissed me once, you remember. Came to my arms and kissed me of your own accord. I defy you to look in my eyes and tell me you don't love me."

She looked him in the eyes, but did not accept his challenge. "I can't marry you," she repeated, "I've got to stay—here."

"Here! In this town, you mean?"

"Yes."

"At your father's?"

"Yes."

"You're insane. You couldn't do that if there were no such fellow as I on earth. Why, this sort of thing is withering you, drying you up, draining all the life and buoyancy out of you, smothering your talent. And there's no reason any longer. The baby's dead."

"That's why."

"Good God, Cynthia, don't talk rot!"

"You can't understand, I know," she said, and with sudden dismay he realized that his pleading, instead of rendering her pliable, had hardened her to steel. Her hand lay in his without a tremor. Her voice had taken on an inexorable quality.

"You might try to explain. I'm ready to listen to reason."

She stared toward the resplendent waters of the little pond, dyed with all October's colors, and spoke in a measured voice. "I stayed for the baby's sake. I stayed when I longed to be away. My life here was galling, hateful. I gave him grudging, unloving care. And God punished me; He took the child.

And don't you see, I can't profit by the baby's death. I can't accept freedom and happiness at the price of his little life."

The subtleties of the feminine conscience were beyond Armitage, but he seized upon the one intelligible statement in her outburst, and came to the defense of a slandered deity. "It's blasphemous to say God's punishing you. What kind of a petty, malicious being do you think He is?"

She made a despairing gesture. "Perhaps I'm wrong in that, but anyway, after I rebelled against being imprisoned here, I can't go joyfully back to the life I love because the baby's death has set me free."

"Why not?"

Though she had assured him that he would not understand, she was shocked at his obtuseness. "O, how can you think it! I was bitter and rebellious. I hated my surroundings and pitied myself—it's the same as if I had longed for him to die."

"You did everything possible to save him. You never spared yourself."

"I loathed it all so," she insisted, "that sometimes it seemed as if I would die if I didn't get away. I thought I was ready to pay any price. But he paid the price—that little helpless child. And—I can't go."

He turned compellingly and snatched her to him.

He crushed her head down against his shoulder and kissed her again and again. As his lips pressed her cheeks, he tasted the salt of her tears, and he heard himself stammering jerky incoherences. "You're crazy—you love me—you're mad—love's your right—my right. All this stuff you've been saying is folly. Kiss me, Cynthia."

Her faint voice answered him, her speech broken like his own, but from a deadly lethargy instead of passion.

"Let me go, Ross—I think—I think I shall die—unless you let me go."

His arm fell to his side. He drew back and stared at her, and a frightful certainty that she had spoken the truth, held him paralyzed. She struggled to her feet, stood swaying a moment, her face ashen, and without a word or look of farewell, turned and went slowly the way she had come.

CHAPTER XVI

AT SUNDOWN

Love and hate are the original Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and one can turn into the other in the twinkling of an eye. As Armitage plodded the interminable way he had traversed so lately with such high hopes, he was shaken by paroxysms of rage, which, though centering on Cynthia, included impartially every member of the irrational sex. Antithetical as his anger seemed to the tenderness which but now had possessed him, it was in reality only his turncoat passion in another guise.

The reason Cynthia had given him for rejecting his love seemed the more preposterous the longer he considered it. She had been condemned to the treadmill of an obnoxious existence because of the baby, and now that the child was dead, his death held her as inexorably as his living need. This farcical reasoning proved her insincerity. She had been playing with him. Doubtless she had been amused to find him gullible. After the immemorial fashion of lovers, he continued to lash himself into a mock frenzy, though underneath his temporary

lunacy was the uncompromising certainty that if the girl who had used him so ill, should stand before him, he would on the instant forgive her everything.

Randall, who had passed an unhappy afternoon, picturing the outcome of the meeting he had helped to arrange, encountered Armitage at the door of his home. At the sight of the other's face he took an uncertain step backward. "Wh—what's happened?" he stammered. For the moment the only adequate explanation of Armitage's saturnine expression seemed that Cynthia's father had surprised the rendezvous, and killed the girl outright. His heart missed several beats before Armitage deigned to notice his inquiry with a surly, "What's happened where?"

"Thought you looked kind of down on your luck."

"That must worry you immensely," Armitage replied with ponderous sarcasm. He passed his gaping host and ascended the stairs to his room. Gradually on Randall's slow wits dawned the meaning of those black looks, that sneering retort, and the other indications of turbulent emotion.

"Golly Ned, I bet he's got the mitten. Keziah's thrown him over. She tried to let him down easy, but he wouldn't have it that way. Nothing would do for him but a knock-out."

Randall's excitement was as uncontrolled as Armitage's own, though so radically different in its

nature. He leaned against the door jamb, momentarily bereft of the power of motion. The tears smarted under his drooping lids. "Mittened him, by gum," he said again. To his simplicity this seemed equivalent to the realization of his dearest hopes. A girl had to marry somebody and if Keziah had rejected Armitage, it must be because she had fixed those uncertain affections of hers on himself. Randall began to mutter incoherent assurances that she had made no mistake. "I'll be good to her. She won't slave for me like she does now. And Susan can come along. There's room enough here for the bunch, except the old man and he can go off and shoot himself."

He gave some minutes to rapturous day-dreams before he recalled his responsibilities as host. When he pounded noisily up the stairs to the room Armitage had been occupying, he was startled to find him packing, though at once he realized that this was the inevitable sequel to what had happened. For all his honest sympathy, a certain elation betrayed itself in his voice as he said, "Aren't going to leave us, are you?"

"Yes."

Randall seated himself on the bed and fixed a compassionate gaze on the gloomy face of his unlucky rival. "We're going to miss you," he declared still with uncomplimentary sprightliness.

Armitage made no reply.

"Guess you're going off feeling this world's one hell of a place. But you'll get over that. Just remember there's as good fish in the sea as ever was caught. And because one girl turns you down, that ain't no sign that another won't be glad of her leavings."

"What the devil!" exclaimed Armitage looking up. Then at the sight of Randall, radiating complacency, his submerged sense of humor struggled up through the ruins of his recent air-castles and took control of the situation. He grinned sourly, reluctantly, but grinned nevertheless, and was aware of an immediate readjustment in the universe.

Mrs. Baird, attracted by the sound of voices, followed her son upstairs and apparently found in Armitage's half-filled suit-case ground for dark suspicion.

"What have you boys been up to?" Her keen eyes went from one to the other, as if she saw in the two young men only a pair of quarrelsome urchins who had not yet outgrown the maternal slipper. "If you've been doing something to make him mad, Randall," she scolded, "you and me'll have a settlement presently."

"Now Ma, you always think it's me if something goes wrong. Can I help it if Keziah Ayres—"

In submitting to the distasteful sympathy of his

rival, Armitage felt he had reached the limit of his endurance along that line. He interposed hastily, "You've all been wonderful to me, Mrs. Baird, but I can't stay forever, you know. I've been here now a great deal longer than I expected to stay."

"I don't believe you ought to use that arm for driving a car," worried Mrs. Baird. "You haven't asked the doctor what he thought about it, have you? I hope your mother won't blame us for not doing better by you. But I guess she hasn't brought up a boy without finding out that a headstrong young man is a pretty poor patient."

Armitage was in a hurry to get away. He had a real affection for Mrs. Baird and in spite of his conflicting interests, he thoroughly liked Randall, but he fancied that a comprehending pity looked out from the good woman's eyes, while Randall was as jubilant as decency allowed. He hurried down to his car, while Mrs. Baird trotted at his heels and begged him to defer his departure till morning.

"It'll be dark before you know it, and at this time of year, it's chilly after the sun goes down. There's no good place to spend the night nearer than Topham, and that's full sixty miles."

"A spin of sixty miles will give me an appetite for my supper," Armitage laughed. He felt that it would be impossible to spend another night in the

locality identified with the thought of Cynthia. He was unwilling to see understanding dawn in still another pair of eyes. He knew they would all be speculating as to Cynthia's reasons for rejecting the city chap who had been dangling around for a month. There was panic in Armitage's soul. He was ready to run.

His leave-taking was prolonged by the difficulty of inducing Mrs. Baird to accept a full week's board for his five day's stay. When at length she yielded, she gave way to disconcerting tears. "It's been nice having you, Mr. Armitage," she sobbed, "I never knew a nicer, pleasanter young man and anyone so thoughful about saving folks' steps. And if it was anybody but Keziah Ayres—"

"Yes, I know, Mrs. Baird. Couldn't expect you to be on my side in that matter." Armitage diverted her thoughts from Cynthia by kissing her with a resounding smack, and the matron's sallow face flamed at the salute.

"Mr. Armitage, you ought to be ashamed. Save your kisses for folks that appreciate 'em. The very idea! It's a pity you're too big to be taken over a body's knee—"

Armitage rolled down the driveway in an indeterminate mood. The turn to the right would bring him in a few minutes to the main traveled road. If he took the turn to the left, he would follow the

river road, rough and often muddy, as well as considerably longer. But from this route he could get a last glimpse of the house that sheltered Cynthia. His unreasonable rage against her had given place to a dreadful longing that was like desperate hunger. Two hours before he had held her in his arms and had kissed her, but already the ecstasy seemed to belong to the remote past. He was never to see her again. The thing was done with. Savagely he pulled the car to the left, conscious that Randall and his mother watching from the door, would wonder at his choice of routes.

The glory of the October day had mysteriously faded. He saw in the variegated drapery of the woods the incongruous shroud of the dead summer. The wind had risen and its weird wailing found an echo in his heart. He felt again a chill like a breath from the bleakness of the coming winter.

The Ayres home stood out gaunt and grim against the gold of the sky. A wisp of smoke from the chimney wavered in the wind, and made him think of a hand gesturing a farewell. The tears stung his eyes as he watched it. Cynthia! She loved him but she was sending him away, the victim of scruples that however unreasonable, showed the fineness of her nature. Too late he told himself that he had been a fool. He should have held her fast in spite of her appeal. He should have kissed

her till she died or yielded. Better death in his arms, with his lips to hers, than the long-drawn-out dying, where only the give and take of the breath and the crawling blood remained of what had once been life.

He dashed the tears from his eyes and the gesture revealed two figures, hurrying across the yellowing pasture to the road. They ran hand in hand he saw, and both were bare-headed, but there resemblance ended. The fleeter of the two was tall and lithe, and she ran as Atalanta would have done, her left hand gripping the right of a pudgy little figure that trotted just a step behind her. The taller girl was dressed in dark blue and the younger wore a checked gingham apron which flapped preposterously as she ran.

Armitage gave a shout and stamped his foot down on the accelerator. Like a spurred horse the car leaped forward, rushing to intercept the runners as they reached the road.

CHAPTER XVII

THE BEND IN THE ROAD

Prison records show it nothing unusual for a man sentenced to serve a term of years, to wind up his affairs, bid his friends farewell, and then unaccompanied by guard or warden, make his way to his grim goal and deliver himself up. In a like mood Cynthia followed the familiar path through the woods back to the lonely farm-house that was to be her prison. She had been the jury in the case, as well as the prisoner at the bar, weighing the evidence for and against herself, for a crime too subtle to be tried in any court save that of Conscience, and bringing in a verdict of Guilty. She had been judge as well as jury, sentencing herself to incarceration for an indefinite period. Now and again as she traversed the winding path, she put her hand against her heart to quiet its aching, and once or twice she cried aloud, a strange, primitive sound that might have issued from the lips of heart-wrung womanhood before language was born.

It was not till she came in sight of her childhood home that the full realization of the consequences

of her choice gripped her consciousness. She stood upon the slope staring down at the low, weather-beaten dwelling, somehow suggestive of the cramping, pitiless activities that went on under its roof. She thought of her mother who had brought the joyousness of girlhood to those dull walls, and offered it a sacrifice on an unhallowed altar. Over in the chicken-yard she saw Susan scattering largess to the squawking poultry, her squat figure foreshortened, till she looked a grotesque little dwarf, a symbol of the stunted life to which Cynthia had condemned herself.

Cynthia crept down the hill, her heart beating laboriously as if instead of descending a slope she were climbing a steep grade. Susan saw her and waved her hand and the older sister mechanically returned the greeting. She came to the side door of the house leading into the living room, pushed it ajar and entered. In contrast to the golden radiance of the outdoor world, the room was dark, and Cynthia's eyes were dimmed by hopeless tears. Advancing blindly she stumbled over a man who sat across the doorway, his big frame hunched into one chair, his feet resting on another.

Thomas Ayres had been a cautious drinker the better part of his life. It is probable that in a vague fashion he realized how thinly civilization had coated the brute in him, and knew that if once

his real self broke through the veneer, he would be as much an outlaw as a stray wolf. But his recent fight with Armitage, and its unexpected conclusion, had been too much for his discretion. He wanted forgetfulness at any price, forgetfulness of the humiliation put upon him by this young upstart in his fine city clothes, forgetfulness of the dread born of defeat, that he was growing old.

He had found little difficulty in securing liquor such as it was, a fiery compound doctored with drugs nicely calculated to unbalance reason and dethrone will. He had been drinking heavily much of the day, but had come home able to unharness his horses without staggering. Yet as he sat there across the threshold, he had sunk far below his normal brutishness, below the level of his species. His human shape was misleading. He was only a bundle of primæval instincts and desires.

Cynthia stumbling in the semi-darkness over her father's outstretched form, lost her balance and fell against him with a startled cry. And before she could climb to her feet again, Ayres' arms went around her. He held her close, laughing gutterally at her struggles. His small eyes, reddened like those of an angry ape, saw in the resisting girl no longer a silent drudge, a necessary bit of household mechanism, but a woman young and beautiful. And Cynthia, every instinct of self-preservation

awake, saw not the father she hated, but a monster for whom there was no name.

Futile as her strength was matched against her father's, her shrieks appealed to that underlying caution which was the most that civilization had ever done for him. His huge arms loosened. He allowed her to regain her feet, and leered up at her, showing his yellow teeth.

"Kizzie! Pretty lil' Kizzie! Stop your noise, damn you!"

The door was still ajar and she dashed outside, shaking with a terror she dared not analyze. Susan had heard her cries, and was running toward her.

"Kizzie, what is it? What's the matter? I thought I heard you scream."

"Quick! Quick!" Cynthia caught the hand of the younger girl, dragging her down the slope toward the road. Thick-set Susan panted as she ran just behind her sister.

"What is it—Kizzie?—Did he—hurt you? Where—we going?"

It was not Cynthia but fate that answered the question. They reached the barbed wire fence, the southern boundary of the farm, and crawled under the wires with a reckless haste that left triangular rents in their clothing. And as they climbed to their feet the driver of an approaching car put on

the brakes suddenly and sprang out beside them.

"Cynthia!"

She turned her colorless face, stared at him a moment as if unable to believe her eyes, then ran to him. "O, Ross, take us away! Take us away!" She collapsed in his arms, and lay a dead weight against his heart.

Armitage accepted the situation without comment. "Jump in, Susan. Then I'll lift her in beside you, and you can hold her till she's better."

"Where are we going?" faltered Susan, obeying.

"Leave that to me." No one would have guessed from Armitage's tone that he himself was as much in the dark as she.

"If we're going far, I wish I had on my best clothes that Kizzie gave me. This dress ain't nothing but patches. But Kizzie was in such an awful hurry—"

The engine purred and the car started, Susan on the back seat supporting her unconscious sister. Not till they had left the farm-house some distance behind, did Armitage ask casually, "What happened, anyway?"

"Search me," returned the puzzled Susan. "Kizzie hadn't more than got into the house, before she was out again, calling to me to hurry. And she yanked me along so fast that my feet didn't scarcely touch the ground. Something made her

scream, though, and Kizzie ain't the kind to whoop it up at the sight of a mouse."

"Scream? Who was in the house? Your father?"

"Nobody but father. And if you ask me," volunteered Susan, "pretty well lit up."

Armitage, his brow contracted, drove on without speaking, and presently the sound of low sobbing stirred him to his heart's depths. He heard Susan's voice uplifted first in consolation, and presently addressing himself in desperate appeal.

"Say, Mr. Armitage, I guess I'll have to borrow your handkerchief. I ain't got none, and I can't find Kizzie's, and if she's going to cry at this rate—"

Armitage passed an immaculate square of monogrammed linen over the back of the seat, and listened as Susan continued to chirp consolation. "Now Kizzie, I wouldn't cry any more if I was you. We're having a nice ride in an automobile and you ought to be enjoying yourself. This here car has got Randall's horses beat a million miles."

Armitage waited for a discreet interval after the sobs had quieted before he turned his head. Cynthia was sitting upright, her reddened eyes staring into vacancy, her fair skin blotched by weeping. He addressed her on the assumption that by her appeal to him, she had committed her fate into his hands.

"Cynthia, we shan't go any further than Topham tonight. Luckily it's the county seat. You and Susan will stay at the hotel, and I'll find a place somewhere near. And in the morning we'll be married."

Cynthia accepted his decision as if it had been a divine decree. It was Susan who protested.

"Married! Say, look here! I ain't saying nothing about starting off to stay all night without a night-gown or a comb or nothing, but look at this dress. Brown with blue patches in the elbows, and too short anyway. Pretty sight for a wedding!"

Armitage chuckled at her indignation. "We'll come to a store after a while. We'll try to fit you out properly."

"Oh!" Susan breathed a sigh of relief. "And will you get a white dress for Kizzie?"

"If she wishes it."

"Oh hush, Susan." Cynthia was suddenly crimson. She was still so dazed that her natural courage and independence were in abeyance. Terror had driven her to the arms of the man she loved. She could imagine no other refuge. Yet the instinct which ante-dates civilization, and sends the savage bride to her husband's tent with a string of ponies as her dowry, brought the shamed blood to her cheeks. She had nothing to bring her lover but herself. And so humble is the proudest woman in

estimating her own value, that had it been Randall Cynthia was marrying on the morrow, she would still have suffered from overwhelming humiliation.

Twenty miles from Topham they came upon a country store, surrounded by vehicles of various sorts and conditions, and unabashed proclaiming itself an Emporium. Armitage turned to Cynthia.

"You might be able to find something here, something that will do till we strike a bigger town. Get her a suit and hats for both of you, and what you need for the night and a hand bag of some sort." Armitage was beginning to realize that at the most primitive hotel, to register Susan in her patched frock, with no wrap but the little shawl around her shoulders, would awaken comment. He slipped a roll of bills into Cynthia's hand, noting with amusement the leaping of the blood to her forehead, and little guessing that it scorched like flame.

Considering the comprehensive character of the purchases to be made, Armitage was not kept waiting long. The two girls presently reappeared, the older carrying a cheap straw suit-case, the younger craning her neck this way and that, the better to see herself. A Fifth Avenue tailor could not have clothed Susan so as to suggest style, but the Emporium had at least outfitted her in a fashion unlikely to excite curiosity. Susan herself, it was clear, was

unharassed by doubt of the superlative elegance of her appearance. She fairly strutted to the car.

"I've got it on over my dress," she explained breathlessly, to Armitage. Kizzie says I can change it at the hotel. There's a shirt waist in that straw thing Kizzie's got, and a petticoat."

"Fine!"

"The hat cost two seventy-five and Kizzie's just the same. Do you think that's too much?"

"I should call it dirt cheap."

Susan settled herself in the car, with a sigh of pure ecstasy.

"New suit, and a new hat," she began, checking the items off on her fingers. "New gloves—first ones I ever had—and a new nightie—"

"Susan!"

"I just meant I was getting everything new all to once. Anybody'd think t'was me that was going to be the bride." Susan rocked herself back and forth in a spasm of mirth, and Armitage chuckled sympathetically. But Cynthia sat silent and shamed, her eyes downcast.

It was eight o'clock when they reached Topham and its single hostelry. Unprepossessing as the latter appeared, it still was doing a thriving business, and the only room available for the two sisters was anything but desirable. It was past the supper hour,

and the frowning proprietor, who acted as clerk and bell-boy, occasionally extending his activities to include those of cook and waiter, showed no enthusiasm over the suggestion of supper for three. Armitage paid for the meal when at last it was ready, as much as he would have been asked in a first-class city restaurant. And even then Armitage and Susan alone did justice to the fare Cynthia hardly touched.

They said goodnight soon after finishing the meal. "The breakfast hour is from seven to half past eight," Armitage told Cynthia. "Will eight o'clock be too early?"

"Too early? Oh no."

"I'll be around to keep you company for breakfast, and then I'll get the license and locate a clergyman. I can't ask you for a goodnight kiss, dearest, because these gaping imbeciles are all watching us, but can't you give me a smile to take with me?"

The smile rewarding this appeal was a rather sorry effort. It stirred him strangely and it cost him a struggle not to take her in his arms before them all. He contented himself by saying softly, "Sleep well, dearest, and if you dream, dream of me." He watched the two sisters go up the stairs together, and then turned his attention to arranging for his own accommodations.

The surly proprietor did not seem inclined to help him out. There was no other hotel, and he knew of

no house near where he could secure a room—not at that hour of the night. Armitage's suggestion that he sit up in the office was withdrawn when he learned that between eleven and six the office served as the sleeping-room of the proprietor and his wife.

A stout man with twinkling blue eyes, evidently one of the townspeople, had showed an amiable interest in Armitage's predicament. He spoke up unexpectedly. "I can let you have a room—if you ain't too particular."

Armitage was not certain whether certain decided prejudices to which he owned, would or would not be considered over-fastidious. "I like to have things clean," he replied cautiously.

"Oh sure! It's clean enough. But if you're fussy about your company—"

"I'll have a bed to myself, I suppose."

"Sure thing. And a room to yourself, too. But it ain't so big."

Armitage laughed in his relief. "All right. I don't want to hurry you, but I'm ready whenever you are." He noticed that the proprietor had lost his look of surliness, and was grinning amiably, apparently pleased that the young man was provided for.

The streets of the county-seat were pitch-dark. Armitage's guide explained that the street lamps were not lighted when the moon was on the job.

That the moon on this particular evening was obscured by heavy clouds was plainly a celestial responsibility. Armitage following in the rear of the hospitable citizen, who had introduced himself as Mr. Pitt, overheard an occasional chuckle, and wondered what in their stumbling progress so appealed to the other's sense of humor.

The home of his prospective host loomed up in the blackness bigger than Armitage had expected. It looked as large as the hotel itself, he thought with a little wonder. He followed Mr. Pitt to the side door and waited as he rang. There was a sound of footsteps within and a light flashed on.

Armitage stared at the window at his left. Barred! He looked at the door ahead, and saw it reinforced by an iron gate. A key turned, and a lanky fellow inside peered out cautiously, before opening the gate.

"It's me, Andy," said the smiling Mr. Pitt. "Me and a new lodger. He thinks he's lucky to get a bed, Andy, and that's more than some of our folks say, ain't it?"

The gate swung open and the two entered. "What sort of a place is this, anyway?" asked Armitage, though already he had guessed the answer.

"County jail," chuckled Mr. Pitt. "Sometimes business is pretty brisk with us, and then again it

ain't. When we've got more rooms than roomers, I'm always glad to help out. Bed's clean, if it is a little hard, and you've got a room to yourself, if it ain't a bridal suite." He closed one eye and regarded Armitage facetiously through the other.

The young man was tired. For several weeks he had confined himself to the activities of a semi-invalid and the day had been strenuous for one in perfect condition. Any bed, so that it was clean, seemed inviting. He answered Mr. Pitt's wink with a laugh, and followed him jauntily into a corridor with a row of cells on either side. Several of the doors were open, showing the cells unoccupied, and behind others came the sound of heavy breathing, proof that the occupants had for a time forgotten their surroundings. At the end of the corridor a man stood upright in his cell, his manner curiously alert, while across from him sat a guard with a revolver on his knee.

Armitage surveying his quarters whimsically, nodded toward the armed guard. "I suppose he has orders to shoot me if I attempt to escape."

Mr. Pitts' face lost its smile. "That's the death watch."

"The death watch?"

"The fellow standing up got in an argument with a neighbor and plugged him full of lead to settle it. So we're going to settle *him*."

"Hanging?"

"On Friday. He'll be my third. If it wasn't for that," said Mr. Pitts, his jovial face greying noticeably, "I wouldn't ask a nicer job than this. Still—three in eleven years ain't bad. Every job has its seamy side, I reckon. Well, goodnight, and pleasant dreams to you."

Stretched on his cot, Armitage found himself disinclined to dream, feverishly wakeful, indeed. The sound of the breathing about him carried him back to France and revived memories he sternly held in obeyance. He resented the thought of the man at the end of the corridor, peering greedily through the grating. Poor devil! Two days and then the mystery. Who knew how far he would go, when the drop fell, or whether he would go at all. Perhaps he would only stand looking on, cynically amused, watching the end of the sordid drama.

His thoughts turned with revulsion from it all. For himself there was no leap into the dark. Tomorrow all uncertainties would end, and love find fulfillment. His heart began to pound. Tomorrow would make Cynthia irrevocably his.

Cynthia! Cynthia! When at last he fell asleep, her name was ringing through his brain like music.

CHAPTER XVIII

FOR BETTER OR WORSE

Though he himself had appointed eight o'clock as the hour for breakfast, Armitage was astir early. The majority of his cellmates were still sleeping when he left his narrow quarters, enviably oblivious to their inability to accompany him, but from the cell at the end of the corridor, the condemned murderer viewed his exit with greedy eyes. Armitage wondered if he had watched all night, clutching at each elusive moment of his vanishing life as if to hold it back.

The hospitable Mr. Pitt declined all remuneration for the night's lodging, and seemed disappointed at Armitage's refusal to breakfast at the expense of the county. "Look us up whenever you're in these parts," he urged. "Always room for one more, that's our motto. Though maybe when you come this way again somebody'll have you tied tight to her apron-strings."

Armitage thought this highly probable. "In fact," he explained, "I'm going to be married this morning." And thereupon Mr. Pitt dealt him a

staggering blow on the back, and expressed cordial wishes for his happiness. "T'ain't many young fellows can say they slept in a jail the night before their wedding. But take it from me, there's a whole lot of 'em who'd ought to have celebrated that way."

Armitage left the jail at seven and strolled about in the crisp freshness of the morning for half an hour, before presenting himself at the hotel to await Cynthia's appearance. The clock was on the stroke of eight when the sisters came downstairs. Cynthia's eyes were evasive, and she looked as though she had slept little. Susan attired in the new shirtwaist registered intense complacency. Catching Armitage's eye she favored him with a wink, expressive of their mutual appreciation of her emergence from the chrysalis to the butterfly stage. The hotel breakfast was a distinct improvement on the impromptu supper but again while Armitage and Susan ate heartily, Cynthia barely touched her food. Armitage guessed this no unusual phenomenon for a girl on her wedding day.

Armitage's securing of a marriage license was not perceptibly delayed by the gratuitous assumption of the county official that he wished a license to hunt. He was inclined to regard it as a good omen that the Congregational parsonage was a trifle the nearest of the trio to which he had been directed, for the Con-

gregational minister was not a day older than Armitage himself, and his wife had been a bride so recently that the mere suggestion of a wedding brought the fluttering color to her cheeks. Enveloped in a long apron, she was sweeping the dead leaves from the walk when Armitage approached, and he surmised that her day's work was hardly under way. Nevertheless she hastened to assure him that everything could wait, and that whenever the bride was ready, the minister would be. Indeed when the wedding party arrived, the sparsely furnished parlor of the old parsonage, forlornly huge for those two love-birds, had made a valiant effort to take on an air of festivity. Flowering plants had been brought from sunny windows, presumably, and over the mantel a maple branch riotously scarlet, made a cheering splash of color against the dingy wall. The minister's wife had discarded her apron for a blue gown that matched her eyes, and her face betrayed such *naive* delight over having a hand in the consumation of a love affair, that Armitage could have kissed her on the spot. He took satisfaction in picturing the elation of the innocent pair over the fifty dollar note enclosed in an envelope in his breast pocket.

It was at least suggestive of Armitage's popularity with the young folks of his set that in his quarter of a century of existence he had acted as

best man or usher at a round dozen of weddings. The recollection of the latest of these occasions crossed his mind as he stood at Cynthia's side in the shabby front room of the shabby parsonage. There had been eight bridesmaids, all dressed in pink, and all looking good enough to eat, and the big fashionable church had been packed to the doors. The though of the amazement of the young fellows who had shared his agreeable responsibilities, could they see him now, threatened Armitage's gravity at a moment when he needed if ever, to be serious.

The minister's little wife, looking on like some benevolent minor divinity, appointed to preside at nuptials, thought it all very beautiful. She was confident that no one ever read the marriage service as her husband read it, and wifely prejudice aside, she had some ground for her opinion, since the minister too, was walking in a land of enchantment, and every word in the service thrilled him to his heart's core. And then the bridegroom was such a fine-looking young man, and the bride so beautiful, though the minister's wife could have wished her not quite so pale, nor quite so composed. Even Susan, seen through the spectacles which spangled the world with rainbows, did not lack charm. Not that she was beautiful—even the minister's wife could not go so far—but she reflected that had

Susan herself been the bride, her face could hardly have been more radiant.

They had made those pledges which mean life's best or worst, as the case may be, and the little gold band was on Cynthia's finger. He had kissed her, not fiercely as he had kissed her in the October woods the day before, but gently, for now she was his, and she must not be frightened. And the minister's little wife had kissed her, too, the color coming and going in her cheeks, as if she herself had just pledged her loyalty till death did them part. And then the minister's wife had signed her name as witness, and Susan had scrawled hers just below and the thing was done.

Armitage drove at a furious rate that morning. His excuse was to reach a decent hotel, where they could lunch in a manner befitting the eventful day, but as a matter of fact his turbulent blood continually urged him to recklessness. Cynthia sat back with Susan, so that he had to turn back his head for a glimpse of her, shy and sweet and now with a bewildering color in her pale cheeks, like another Galatea just come to life. At imminent risk of wrecking the car, he turned frequently to feast his eyes upon her, staring till she raised her own eyes and blushed to the roots of her hair. And then he again gave his attention to his driving and stepped

on the gas, for the same reason a young turkey cock spreads his tail before his observant mate.

They reached the hostelry Armitage had in mind a little after one, and lunched well enough to justify the young man's impatience. All three were prosaicly hungry. Even Cynthia ate heartily for all her unconcealed concern over Susan's table-manners. The meal finished, they rested a little, Susan dozing in her chair, the others conversing in the lowered tones of delicious intimacy. Cynthia was more like the self he remembered than at any time since her reversion to Keziah. Her grey eyes were again translucent pools, and he loved the sound of her soft laughter.

When he brought the car to the entrance, the two girls were at the curb awaiting him. He raised his voice a little, "Mrs. Armitage."

Cynthia started, looked around wildly, then turned reproachful orbs on the jester. "Oh, Ross!"

"You might as well grow accustomed to it, Beloved. For better or worse, that title's yours. I notice our little sister is extremely sleepy and I suggest that you give her the back seat to herself, so she can curl up and take a regular nap. You'll sit in front with me."

The suggestion met with approval. Cynthia sprang lightly to the seat beside him, while Susan

grunting like an amiably disposed pig, climbed to her place in the rear, and again the car sped on.

Susan was not long in taking advantage of the privilege so thoughtfully accorded her by her new brother-in-law, as was attested by her peaceful snores. And as if the sound were a signal for which she had been waiting, Cynthia leaned toward her husband.

"Ross," she faltered, "there's something I want to talk over with you. I—I'm a little worried."

"Afraid you've taken the wrong man after all," he laughed. And then as she looked at him with something in her eyes not translatable into language, he put one hand over the pair clasped in her lap and kept it there. Cynthia seemed in no haste to unfold her anxieties. The two sat silent, the October wind in their faces, and May in their hearts.

She took herself in hand at length, obedient to the promptings of an implacable conscience. "It's about Susan, Ross."

"Susan? Oh yes!" He spoke a little vaguely. "Well, what about Susan?"

"Oh Ross, I wouldn't say it to anyone but you, I couldn't, but—O, she's a dear girl, nobody knows how dear but me, but I'm afraid she's going to be a little shock to your mother."

He looked at her tenderly. Putting her appre-

hension into words had cost a cruel effort. Her face was aflame, her smile piteous. He tightened his hold of her hands. "You don't need to worry about mother," he comforted her.

"Oh I know how sweet and wonderful she is. But it's hard on her, Ross, having you marry me, even if there wasn't a little sister to consider. And Susan—I feel disloyal to say it—but it's true that one has to get acquainted with Susan to appreciate her. Just at the first it's bound to be a shock."

Armitage found he was bracing himself for an ordeal. In the background of his consciousness had hovered the realization that sooner or later he must explain to Cynthia the exact status of affairs between his mother and himself. But now that the inevitable moment had come, the duty was more formidable than he had anticipated.

"I tell you, dearest, that you mustn't worry about mother. It's not likely that our paths will cross very soon and when they do—"

"What do you mean, Ross? Aren't we going to your mother's now?"

Her hands were fluttering under his. Her face betrayed that his nonchalant statement had carried at least a suggestion of the truth. He was relieved that her intuition was meeting him more than half way.

"Mother's rather out of temper at present, Sweetheart. She'll get over it."

"About me? Am I the reason?"

"She's no worse than other mothers, I suppose. They all want to pick out their daughters-in-law, you know. And mother was always devoted to Anne. Her maneuvers used to make me swear ages ago, before I ever saw you."

"I've come between you and your mother."

Her tremulous fingers had escaped him. Her hands clasped and unclasped with a gesture suggesting pain all but intolerable. He watched her averted profile in silence for a moment then shrewdly tried other tactics. "Oh, mother will bow to the inevitable in time, as mothers have always done when their sons and daughters have taken their lives into their own hands. But it's a little rough on you, Beloved, if you thought you were marrying a rich man."

Something in her look as she faced him brought back the night of the baby's death. "Ross, I never thought—money's nothing. You're all that matters —you—you—"

He did not know whether she had flung herself against his shoulder, or whether he had caught her to him. The car wabbled, uncertain whether to climb the bank on the left, or commit suicide in

the ditch to the right, then recovered itself and glided decorously on. The lovers kissed, looked into each other's eyes, and kissed again.

"Are you poor, Ross? Have I made you poor?"

"Devil a bit. I've got several thousand of my own, five or six, I've forgotten which, and that'll run us till I land something good."

"But what are you going to do?" Her voice sharpened on the last word, was almost shrill.

"Blessed if I know." Armitage shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "The fact is I've never really gotten started, Cynthia. When the war broke out, I was just through college, and mother and I had planned to go across in the fall and spend a year abroad. Well—we didn't go. At first, you know, everybody thought the fuss would be over in a few weeks or months. When it got home to us that it was an honest-to-God war, I wanted to enlist in a Canadian regiment, but mother wouldn't listen to that. She was sure America would come in, and she wanted me in a United States uniform. And for that matter, I wanted it just as much."

He looked at her as if in anticipation of sympathetic agreement, and she said hurriedly, "Yes, yes, of course," though with an air of thinking of something else.

"Well, with relief work and that sort of thing, I

kept busy enough. And I went to Plattsburgh and enlisted the minute war was declared. So while the years since I saw you first have been chuck full of work and excitement, I haven't made a start yet in a business way. Now I'm sure of you, young woman, business will be the next thing."

She did not return his smile. "When did you quarrel with your mother, Ross?"

"Oh, it's not a quarrel. It takes two to make a quarrel, and I'm too happy to fight anybody even Germans. She simply announced her ultimatum and I—"

"Her ultimatum? What was it?"

"See here, dear, remember the fate of Bluebeard's wives, and shun curiosity."

"But Ross, I must know. Don't you see I must?"

He gave a little sigh, remembering that a woman's sense of humor always failed her in an emergency. It was impossible to make Cynthia treat the situation with levity. Her face was tense and drawn.

"Well, if you must have it, she was rather nasty about money, for the first time in her life. Reminded me that the income from father's estate was hers as long as she lived and that she meant to live a long time—as I hope to God she will."

"Of course—yes—of course. But the ultimatum?"

"Well, Mrs. Bluebeard, she informed me that if I

married a certain young woman who shall be nameless, I was definitely on my own. And now let's talk of something else. Devilish topic for a honeymoon trip."

"I've come between you and your mother," she grieved. "And I've made you poor. Oh Ross, you should have told me."

"Tell you!" He dropped his jesting manner and was suddenly and fiercely the lover. "Wasn't it hard enough to win you as it was, you little wild thing with your qualms and your conscience? Do you think I was going to put one more obstacle in my way? And what does it matter? What does anything matter except that we love each other?"

The steering wheel of the car was undoubtedly in the way, but not an insuperable obstruction to lovemaking. Cynthia's protests were silenced by his kisses. Her head lay against his shoulder, a loosened strand of her hair whipping against his cheek. She lay with closed eyes, and lips slightly parted, as quiescent as if, like Susan, she were fast asleep. But under his hand he felt her pounding heart, giving the lie to her air of detached tranquility.

CHAPTER XIX

THE AWAKENING

THE CONTINENTAL HOTEL, where they registered for the night, was so imposing a structure that even before she crossed its portal, Susan's vain-glorious complacency underwent a collapse, similar to that experienced by the Queen of Sheba, under like provocation. There was no more spirit in her. As the uniformed bell-boys hurried to relieve Armitage of the modest luggage of the party, Susan clutched her sister's sleeve, and she held to it with the proverbial grip of the drowning, till they took their seats in a small parlor adjoining the lobby.

Armitage came back from his interview with the clerk, wearing a slight frown. "Sorry, but I couldn't get adjoining rooms. They're very full just now. Susan's room is on the same floor, however, and near enough so she won't be lonely. Now who's ready for dinner?"

The long hours in the open air had sharpened Armitage's appetite to a ravenous keenness, but he had not finished his soup before he had discovered that he was the only one of the trio who was enjoy-

ing the meal. Cynthia was plainly preoccupied, and Susan as evidently overwhelmed by the magnificence of her surroundings. As her eyes went from the deft waiters in their swallow-tails, to the diners at the glittering tables, the women for the most part in evening dress, she felt more than ever like the Queen of Sheba. Hardly noticing the food before her, she sat tense but observant, her fork held upright as Neptune holds his trident, and her mouth ajar, though not for its legitimate purpose. With the unthinking extravagance of one who has never been obliged to consider money seriously, Armitage continued to order dishes which neither of his companions touched, and at the conclusion of the meal tipped the waiter according to his idea of what a man owed himself on his wedding day.

"What about the theatre?" he asked as he left the dining room, Susan stumbling in the wake of the others but still gripping Cynthia's sleeve. "It's not too late, is it?"

"Oh I'd rather not," Cynthia appealed, and her swift downward glance over her shabby suit explained her reluctance.

"A movie, then," suggested her husband, reflecting that this method of killing time permitted a discreet amount of love-making. He could hold Cynthia's hand in the darkness, and no one would be the wiser. But his anticipations were not re-

alized, for at the performance Susan sat between them, and Cynthia's slender brown fingers were out of his reach. The naive comments of his sister-in-law on the spectacle were a partial compensation for his disappointment, and frequent titters in the vicinity indicated that he was not the only one entertained.

It was after ten when they returned to the hotel and he endeavored to make his suggestion matter-of-fact. "We've had a hard day and tomorrow won't be much easier. We'd better turn in right away."

"Have I got to sleep all alone?" wailed Susan with an anguish so penetrating that Armitage looked about apprehensively to see if she had been overheard. Her manner indicated that she expected the worst, and the abruptness of her transition to relief when Cynthia said quickly, "No, I shall stay with you," left her expression a ludicrous blending of consternation and content.

Armitage taken by surprise had nothing to say regarding the arrangement, but he realized with peculiar poignancy that on a wedding journey, if ever in life, three is a crowd. He secured the keys from the clerk and tendered them to Cynthia. "Which will you have?"

"Ninety-seven."

"The bags are in the other room, you know."

"Yes, I know. I'll unlock the door for Susan, and come for our things in a minute."

He felt decidedly better at the realization that he would have a chance to say goodnight to her out of the range of Susan's attentive eyes. But Cynthia's minute was so prolonged that it gave him time to smoke more than one cigarette. As he paced the floor unable to hold himself quiet, he began to wonder if her courage had failed her, but her timid rap announced her presence at length, and his answering, "Come in" betrayed an understanding of the significance of the moment, try as he would to make his tone nonchalant.

She came into the room without meeting his eyes, and her look of weariness made him ashamed of his temporary resentment. "Are you very tired, Sweetheart?"

"Yes, I'm tired. I couldn't sleep last night, everything was so strange. I didn't put anything in the closet, did I?" She was making an unsuccessful effort to be matter-of-fact as she collected the few articles she had unpacked for her hasty toilet, but when at length she looked at him, her grey eyes were dark with unfathomable tragedy. "Goodnight."

He moved toward her and took her in his arms. The shyness of clean young love was upon him, and her inexplicable distress stirred his ready chivalry.

He touched her lightly, almost with reverence. As her head sank against his shoulder, the heavy plaits of her black hair wound about her head, rasped his cheek, and he kissed them softly.

"Ross?" The sweetness of her voice had a minor note. "If I've made a mistake today—if I've done wrong—"

"Hush! I won't listen."

"Oh but you must, dear. If you're ever sorry, remember that I loved you. Forgive me, because I loved you."

He took her by the shoulders and held her from him. "Now look me in the eye. Understand that this is the red-letter day of my life. As for forgiving you, as long as you love me, Cynthia, there'll be nothing to forgive. Now kiss me."

She lifted her face obediently, then stooped and pressed her cheek against his coat. He was aware that the gesture revealed a passion that had been lacking when their lips met, but before he could expostulate, she was gone. His pulses were throbbing, his breath unsteady, and realizing that sleep was out of the question for the present, he gave the next few hours to hard thinking. He must lose no time getting a start in life. Already he was responsible for the support of three, and the new year might give into his keeping still another life. The pros-

pect was sobering, and yet exhilarating. He was impatient to get to work.

A restless night often atones by several hours of heavy sleep as a wind-up, and Armitage woke to find it considerably past the hour he had set for breakfast. He dressed in haste and went downstairs prepared to apologize, but there was as yet no sign of Cynthia and her attendant satellite. He moved about watching the descending elevators disgorging entirely insignificant people, and congratulated himself that his wife was making up her arrears of sleep.

His attention was distracted from the elevator by the discovery of a bell-boy at his elbow, proffering something on a small tray. "You're Mr. Armitage, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"The lady left it."

Armitage looked at the boy, then at the square envelope upon the tray. He had a curious feeling that something was happening of which he had all the time been dimly aware, as if he had rehearsed it long before. Mechanically he repeated, "The lady left it," and was conscious that he had not asked for an explanation, but had spoken in a tone of fatalistic acceptance.

"Yes, sir." The boy waited for a moment. "She settled for the room."

"Oh yes, she settled for the room." Armitage did not know how long a time had elapsed between the boy's statement and his rejoinder. In the interval the room had whirled about dizzily, so that instinctively he had braced himself as if he stood on the deck of a ship, wallowing through high seas, his feet apart to guard against an overthrow. There was a roaring in his ears. Again he perceived that the bell-boy was holding out something, a tray with a square of white paper, that had a way of disappearing suddenly, as if it were a part of a conjuror's equipment. He took it, pinching it tightly with thumb and forefinger, that it should not get away from him. Then his brain steadied somewhat, and he saw his name written in Cynthia's whimsical hand.

He groped his way to a chair, sat down and opened the communication. He could not read it at once, for the letters made a hodge-podge on the page, as if engaged in an unauthorized game of logomachy, but he was aware of the bell-boy's interested scrutiny, and for the moment his thought was chiefly on the necessity of keeping up appearances. As he sat gazing down on the page, the frolicsome letters seemed to realize their indiscretion and hurried to arrange themselves into groups that stood for words. Again his brain cleared, and he found himself able to read.

"Ross:

"I know that I have done something beyond forgiveness, but to go on with it will only add to the wrong. As I look back to yesterday it seems I must have been insane. I am not trying to excuse myself but I have been through enough in the last few weeks to make me a little mad.

"Ross, I can't go on. I've come between you and your mother and some day you would find it hard to forgive me. If I stayed I would make you poor, and there is nothing I can give you which will make up for what you must sacrifice. And, dear, we can't fit into your life, Susan and I. I could see the people in the dining-room last evening, looking at us curiously, and wondering what possible connection there could be between a man of your stamp and us.

"I couldn't look into your eyes and telf you this. I couldn't leave you if you put out a finger to keep me. I have to take the cowardly course and run away. And the time will come when you will forgive me for what I did yesterday, and thank me for what I am doing now.

"Oh my dearest, my dearest, if only I could have been Cynthia. If only it had been as easy as I thought, to get away from the ugliness into which one is born. Since I'm running away, it won't be hard for you to undo yesterday's mistake. Ask your mother to forgive me. Tell her she cannot blame me more than I blame myself. Say to her that on my knees I ask her forgiveness.

"Ross, you may not believe it for a little, but sooner or later you will understand that I am doing this because I love you better than myself.

"Keziah.

"I'm sorry about the money. I must keep it for the present because it is all I have."

Armitage folded the letter deliberately, and returned it to its envelope. The incident in the village parsonage the previous day had wrought on him a psychological transformation. He would have pursued Keziah Ayres to the world's end. He would have overborne her scruples, laughed away her doubts, beaten down her resistance, mastered her will, won her in spite of herself. But the writer of the letter was Cynthia Armitage, his wife, who had left him voluntarily, despite her vows, and he would not have crossed the street to bring her back. His masculine pride was wounded to the quick. He was not the lover, stirred to fresh ardor by flight, but the husband, wronged and resentful.

Again he was aware of the bell-boy's observation. He fancied a knowing look in the youth's pale eyes, on his lips the shadow of a grin. He beckoned him and as the boy came up, handed him a coin without looking at it. Then he rose and slipped the letter into his pocket, "As long as they haven't waited," he said casually, "I'd better see about getting my breakfast."

CHAPTER XX

A NEW START

When Cynthia paid her reckoning at the Continental Hotel and walked out into a strange city to seek her fortune, she did not feel in the least like a recreant wife. On the contrary the conviction that she was making the supreme sacrifice for the one supremely loved lent to her mood an exaltation such as has sent many a martyr smiling to the stake. Her sole assets were the scanty contents of the straw suit case, and a little over ten dollars remaining from the money Armitage had thrust into her hands the night of her flight from home. Susan, under the circumstances, could not well be regarded as anything but a liability. Yet for the moment the certainty that she was acting for the good of the man she loved dominated the torturing indecision of her sleepless night, and gave her the strength she needed.

Susan accompanying her in the manner peculiar to Susan, just a little behind and always out of step, so as to have the appearance of trotting at her heels like a little dog, did not share her sister's mood.

When idealism is in control, practical natures are generally bewildered and frequently aggrieved. "Where are we going?" puffed Susan from the rear. "Why don't we wait for Ross?"

"We are not going to see Ross again."

"Not ever?"

The question threatened Cynthia's lofty calm. She waited long to give her answer, and then gave it without explanation, "No."

Susan was dumbfounded. "Well, if that ain't the limit. What did you take him for, if you was going to walk off and leave him the next day?"

The remorseless commonsense of the interrogation made Cynthia wince, but the impossibility of explaining the situation to Susan kept her silent. And Susan after waiting vainly for a reply, proceeded to express her views more fully. "When I get married, I'm going to stick to him unless he hits me over the head with a poker. I can't see any sense in getting married to somebody, and then saying right away you're never going to see him again."

"Oh hush, Susan," implored the older girl. "Please stop talking about it. I can't bear it."

Something of the spiritual anguish temporarily submerged by her sense of self-immolation sounded in her closing cry. With a hop, skip and jump, Susan came abreast of her sister, and seized her arm.

"Listen here, Kizzie! After you took him, did you find out you liked Randall best?"

The glance turned upon her would have withered a nature more sensitive than Susan's. Flame leaped from Cynthia's eyes. Fury at the sacrilege of the question temporarily bereft her of the power of speech. And when she choked out, "How dare you!" her voice was so hoarse and unnatural that Susan released her arm and took a hasty step backward.

"You don't need to get so mad, Kizzie. A person has a right to ask a polite question without getting sat on."

"The idea of comparing Ross and Randall." Nothing is more fatal to the sense of humor than to be in love. Cynthia did not dream she was acting absurdly.

Susan stood her ground. "Well, I don't know. I like Ross all right. He's a lot sweller than Randall, of course, but I'd just as soon my husband wouldn't be too swell. Ross makes me think of those shoes they've got in the show window at Ball's, the ones with the pointed toes. They look pretty but they must pinch your feet something awful. Randall's like a nice big slipper with room enough to wriggle your toes."

Susan's philosophy of wedlock had given Cynthia time to get herself in hand. Except that she was

still a little short of breath, nothing in her answer betrayed her lingering acrimony. "We won't talk about it any more, Susan. Not ever again."

"All right." Susan had once more fallen to the rear and her acquiescence seemed to come from a distance. "We won't talk about it if you say so, but when Ross wakes up and finds us gone, he'll do some talking, you take it from me."

It was not seven o'clock when they left the hotel and few people were in sight. Although the city was strange to Cynthia, some instinct directed her from the imposing shops and stately office buildings in the vicinity of the Continental, to a part of town where the streets were narrower and neglected, and the buildings shabbier and lower, and where to judge from the crowded street-cars, the day's work began much earlier. Cynthia pausing in front of a small eating-house to buy a morning paper from a newsboy, caught the odor of coffee as the door swung open to admit a patron, and became aware that she was faint. "We might as well eat here as anywhere," she said.

There were half a dozen round tables in the small room, but early patrons seemed to prefer the stools at the counter where they were emptying plates and coffee cups with amazing alacrity, though most of them had sufficient leisure to turn their heads at the girls' entry and stare. Cynthia ordered rolls and

coffee, and was conscious of relief in reflecting that here Susan's table manners would not attract attention. If the thought crossed her mind that there had been an element of truth in Susan's simile, when she compared Armitage to a narrow shoe, she dismissed the intruder without ceremony.

As she ate she scanned the advertising columns of the paper she had purchased. The sky-rocket tendency of rents had multiplied the number of furnished rooms offered the public, to the end that the solitary worker might share the staggering burden of the householder. The names of the streets meant nothing to Cynthia and she was perforce guided by the claims of the advertisers, though these had an effect the reverse of their intention. If the emphasis was laid on the exclusive location or the beauty of the view, Cynthia passed them by half-read. Reference to hard-wood floors and private baths left her indifferent. Her attention was reserved for those which frankly challenged the interest of the economical by laying stress on reasonable terms. The two or three which offered as an additional inducement the privilege of light housekeeping were mentally double-starred.

The Help Wanted columns were lamentably shrunken in comparison with those she had perused in the days when she was getting her start and gave more space to factory hands and domestics than to

office workers. Warned by previous experience, Cynthia passed indifferently over those advertisements which read like paragraphs from uplift magazines, calling for women of personality and breeding, ready to devote their leisure to humanitarian activities that would at the same time, assure them of large financial returns. A few stenographers' positions were open, and though her self-confidence had failed her so completely in the crisis of her life, she read their requirements without apprehension. Industrious, experienced, capable, reliable—she knew herself all of these.

A policeman on the corner beyond the restaurant gave her some helpful information regarding streets, but the girls walked many a weary mile before they found quarters which met even Cynthia's unexacting requirements. Early in the afternoon, a wizened little woman in a stiffly starched percale, opened the door in answer to their ring and a glance assured Cynthia that here was one who would measure up to her country standards of cleanliness. Nor was the hope disappointed for the sparsely furnished, unattractive house had an aggressive odor of soap, and judging from appearances, the furniture as well as the floors had frequent encounters with the scrubbing brush. Apparently the favorable impression was mutual, for the brief interview was concluded by Cynthia's becoming the lessee of a small

back room on the third floor, its one window giving an uninspiring view of brick walls. The week's rent had been paid in advance, and the landlady had obligingly directed them to a delicatessen shop in the neighborhood where one could buy "'most anything."

Though it was already afternoon, Cynthia could not rest without making an effort to secure a position. With the most rigid economy there would not be enough remaining of her ten dollars to pay the rent of the room for a second week, and accordingly it was imperative that she find work at once. Here again luck was with her. An advertiser of the morning had accepted one of a number of applicants, and set her to work, but when he was ready for his letters by mid-afternoon, the stenographer was no more than well started. The employer's acrid comments led to pert retorts, and ended by the young woman's donning her wraps some fifteen minutes before Cynthia made her appearance.

The employer had lost interest in references, fortunately for Cynthia, who had none to offer. "Take this letter and let's see what you can do with it. This office isn't a rest room for girls who want pin money."

"What I must have is a living."

"And I must have somebody who can deliver the goods. Now we'll see."

Cynthia's short-hand was rusty and her fingers stiff, but fortunately she had the temperament to which an emergency is a challenge. Her hand was steady and her head cool when much depended on her being at her best. Later she might shiver and turn pale at the thought of all that hung on her success, but not till the crisis was over. She took the letter and typed it with reasonable rapidity and absolute correctness. The business man's irascible expression changed as he looked it over.

"You say you haven't had a position for some time?"

"Not for six months. I've just come here from my home in the country. Formerly I worked—"

"What salary do you want?"

It was clear that the inquiry was purely formal. It was not a question of what salary Cynthia wanted, but what she would take. She ended by accepting fifteen dollars a week, with the understanding it would be raised at the expiration of a month, provided she gave satisfaction.

It was after six when Cynthia reached home, and Susan welcomed her as if she had just returned from an Arctic expedition. Cynthia's heart ached as she realized the tragic loneliness of the younger girl through the endless afternoon. "You'll be all right when you're once started in school," she comforted her.

"School! Me!" Susan's consternation suggested that in broaching the plan which seemed to her all-important, Cynthia had failed grievously in tact.

"Why, yes, Susan. There are so many wonderful things to find out about, and school will help you. And in the evening when you aren't studying, we'll read aloud. We can get books from the public library."

This glowing picture failed to arouse Susan to enthusiasm. "I don't mind the reading," she whimpered. "But school! Why, I know enough now."

"Oh Susan, your feeling that way shows how much you have to learn."

"That place where we ate our dinner had a sign in the window, 'Dish-washer wanted.' Now I could wash dishes."

"I know, Susan. But you want to fit yourself to do a different kind of work."

"Somebody has to wash dishes," lamented Susan, and Cynthia perceived she was not to be permitted the luxury of sadness. It would be necessary for her to laugh, to sparkle, to pretend to good spirits in order to keep up Susan's heart during the period of her metamorphosis. At the office she must be the efficient machine, at home the grimacing counterfeit of buoyancy. Nowhere in her days would there be time or place for heart-ache.

Only once during the dreary evening did Susan smile. Cynthia feverishly watchful for any indication of reviving spirits, gaily welcomed the longed-for phenomenon. "Now what are you laughing at?"

"You told the woman here—Mrs. Homer—that you was Miss Ayres and then you go around wearing a wedding-ring."

Cynthia perceived that for all the defects in Susan's education, she was not lacking in shrewd common-sense. The gold band must be sacrificed like the rest, and Cynthia who had gone dry-eyed through the ordeal of abandoning the man to whom she had given her heart, and pledged her life, burst into tears as she drew her wedding-ring from her finger.

CHAPTER XXI

"ONE WHOM HIS MOTHER COMFORTETH"

WHEN as duly chronicled, for the benefit of coming generations, little Tommy Tucker sang for his supper, it is uncertain whether his mood was buoyant and care-free, or the reverse. The chances are at least even, that the supper, and not the expression of inward joyousness was the incentive of Tommy's song. That law of human society that one must work if he wishes to eat, grim though it sometimes seems, has served as a life-preserver in innumerable shipwrecks. The prosaic need of bread and butter has kept many a woman from heartbreak and guided the feet of many a man along the paths of rectitude.

Just what would have been the effect of his wife's desertion on Armitage had the necessity of self-support not loomed dominant in his thoughts, is a matter of conjecture. In an emergency innate fastidiousness may prove as great a safeguard as moral principle, and Armitage was accordingly doubly fortified. But while he was now responsible only for himself, instead of for three, the momentum of

his recent sense of obligation carried him irresistibly forward. Work! He must get work at once, to prove himself a man among men, and to find a refuge from intolerable thinking.

It was indicative of his lack of experience that Armitage should have decided to make his start in a strange city. The benefit due to tendering his applications where his name would be instantly recognized was offset, in his opinion, by the disadvantages of proximity to the mother from whom he was estranged. He was conscious of a profound reluctance to meet his former friends. His anomalous position would make it difficult for him to resume normal relations with the young people he had known from boyhood. "A new deck and a new deal," was his decision.

The experience of the following month was enlightening. Armitage's self-esteem, already severely tested by Cynthia's defection, was to suffer shocks equally rude. The business situation was not of a sort prompting employers to welcome enthusiastically inexperienced young men, even if blessed with a pleasing personality, and equipped with a thorough education. Armitage was turned down as casually, he reflected almost with amusement, as if he had been Randall Baird, applying for a job. His fighting blood now stood him in good stead. He met each new rebuff doggedly, and lost no time in making a

new trial. At the end of a month he succeeded in securing a position, though his success failed to elate him as the salary seemed to him absurdly inadequate. He could not help wondering what he would have done as the head of a family.

Armitage had never written his mother since the letter that had threatened the withdrawal of her financial assistance, and while the bitterness of his mood had abated, he found it impossible to break the silence between them, even though the fact that he was now earning a salary would divest his action of any suggestion of appealing for aid. But one evening when his loneliness had reached intolerable poignancy, he wrote Anne Rossiter. His letter made no reference to Cynthia, but told her considerable of his work, omitting all reference to the salary. Thirty-six hours later he received a telegram from his mother, saying that she would be at a local hotel that evening, and asking him to dine with her.

It was inevitable that at the sight of each other, the pent-up current of affection should break bounds, sweeping away the last vestige of resentment. Armitage had gone up to his mother's rooms on the third floor, braced for an unpleasant ordeal, but as he entered her sitting-room and she ran toward him, he found himself a child again. They clung to each other, he crying as openly as she, each stammering comfort for the other. "Mother dear,

there's nothing to cry about," he gulped, and she pressing her streaming cheek to his, sobbed in answer, "Oh my darling boy, to think I could have hurt you like this."

It was after they had regained a superficial self-control, that Mrs. Armitage took the bull by the horns. In those weeks of estrangement she had come to the conclusion that nothing mattered except keeping her hold on her son's affection. She stood back from him her hands resting on his shoulders, and smiled into his eyes, though her lips were still tremulous.

"Ross, I wasn't sure. Perhaps I should have asked you to bring Cynthia with you."

"No," he said heavily. "No, it wasn't—necessary." The instantaneous change in him was both enlightening and alarming. She slipped her hand through his arm.

"Come and sit beside me, Ross, and tell mother all about it. We'll feel more like dinner a little later."

For weeks Armitage had lived in solitary self-repression. The reaction was bound to come sooner or later, and his mother's heavenly solicitude and tenderness swept him off his feet. He dropped on his knees beside her chair, hiding his face in her lap, and his overcharged heart poured itself out in a story incoherent, confused, broken by sobs. There

was no attempt at chronological sequence in his recital. He rambled from incident to incident, impelled only by his desperate need to unburden his heart.

And Mrs. Armitage, all mother for the moment, sat without speaking, fearing to check the spontaneous flow of his confidence, even by asking an explanation of what she did not understand. Her fingers smoothing his close-cropped hair, were mutely eloquent of passionate sympathy. But while her hand moved with tranquilizing rhythm, her face underwent significant changes as she listened, flushing, paling, passing in an instant from tenderness to anger, from perplexity to comprehension. She was thankful that Cynthia had cut the Gordian knot, yet furious at her for doing so.

She waited some minutes after he had finished before she spoke. Then she said in a level voice, "When did you tell her of our misunderstanding, Ross?"

"The day—the day we were married."

"Before the ceremony—or after?"

Even without comprehending the import of her question, he felt the hostility behind it, and hesitated over the answer, "Why—afterward."

The hand upon the head stiffened, stopped, then went on mechanically, "The cruel, mercenary girl," said Mrs. Armitage in a voice that rasped.

He flung up his head, instantly on the defensive. "O, she's not mercenary, nothing like that."

"She married you one morning and deserted you the next, didn't she, having in the meantime learned you were dependent on your own earnings. She may not have been thinking of the money, Ross, but it is hard to find another explanation for her conduct."

"There were different things. You see her younger sister—"

"The sister was hardly a new development. She had known about her all along."

He made a gesture of desperation. "It isn't easy to explain. I don't altogether understand it myself. But she's not mercenary. She wasn't thinking of the money. I'd stake my life on that."

He divined in his mother's hesitation a reluctance to blast the last of his youthful illusions. "I won't argue the question with you, Ross," she said at length. "I love you for defending her, even though I believe her undeserving. And if she is what I think her, she has overreached herself. She might have known I wouldn't stand by that mad letter of mine. How could I? What would it have been worth to me to have every luxury, when my boy was struggling to make ends meet. If she had been true to you, everything that is mine would have belonged to you and to her."

"You're wrong about her," he repeated stubbornly. He could not blame his mother for her opinion, since hers was clearly the logical explanation of Cynthia's course. In fact though he absolutely denied its truth, the suggestion was to remain in the background of his consciousness, like a sinister figure, hiding behind a curtain, ready at any moment to emerge.

Mrs. Armitage's assumption that the reconciliation between her son and herself meant a return to their former relations, proved fallacious. Ross refused to resign his position and accompany her home, as she had fully expected him to do. He refused flatly to allow her to supplement his salary by a generous allowance. She perceived that in the few weeks since she had seen him last, he had definitely emerged from boyhood into manhood. Even the war had matured him less than this brief episode of love and loss.

Mrs. Armitage changed her plans, and instead of returning home that day, remained over the week end. The mother and son spent every evening together, and had a Sunday of uninterrupted companionship. When they kissed each other goodbye at midnight, she saw in his eyes the shadows of coming loneliness, but wisely forbore to urge him to change his mind though she would probably have made the attempt, had she not felt reasonably sure

of getting her own way by less obvious methods. After her return home she wrote him daily, and Anne, too, sent him pleasant communications, varying from a few lines, scrawled across a sheet of note paper and conveying some scrap of information she thought of interest, to letters of sixteen pages crowded with entertaining gossip. Neither woman ever referred directly or indirectly to Cynthia.

A month after Mrs. Armitage's return, Ross received from a firm in his native city an offer of a position with an attached salary just three times the amount he was at present earning. He suspected his mother's influence back of the business-like communication, but even his new and sensitive independence could not find this suspicion a ground for refusing the offer. He telegraphed his acceptance, then handed in his resignation, and it did a little toward reviving his drooping self-esteem that his employer actually seemed regretful, and in urging him to reconsider, went so far as to promise a substantial increase in salary.

Again at home, Ross justified his mother's certainty that her son had irrevocably changed, by flinging himself into business as ardently as if he had set his heart on becoming a millionaire His employer, a self-made man, who had several times noted the results of combining the roles of society man, attending dances four or five nights a week,

and business man at his desk at nine in the morning, and who, if the truth be told, had had his doubts regarding this particular silk-stocking specimen, was relieved by the young man's assurance that he was permanently out of the society game. With the new Ross, business came first, his mother a poor second. Once a week or so he went to call on Anne, who with her infallible instinct for adaptation, showed herself simply a good pal. As for his other friends, he neglected them so absolutely that except for his mother and Anne, he might almost as well have remained in a city of strangers. The intolerable pain of his chastening experience had died down to a dull ache of which waking or sleeping he was always conscious, though when working at full pressure he sometimes almost reached the point of forgetfulness. Graver than his years, embittered, turning to ambition as an anodyne, as other men drink themselves into forgetfulness, he impressed the wiseacres who watched him as one who might go far.

Six months after his return home, something happened which went to show that his apparent calm was as misleading as that of the slumbering volcano, in whose depths seethe molten tides, waiting their moment to break through the crust and overwhelm the vineyards below. A letter came from Randall Baird, enclosing a money order for fifteen dollars.

The letter was in Randall's characteristic style, and it took Armitage some moments to discover that he was writing in Cynthia's behalf. The money, Randall explained, was Kizzie's first payment on her debt to him, and that she would send the rest as soon as possible.

Had Randall presented the money in person, he would have met more than the just due of the meddler. As Armitage was obliged to rely on pen and ink for expressing his feelings, the other young man escaped with a whole skin, profiting moreover by an enforced delay of several hours. When Armitage found the moment to write him, he had cooled off sufficiently to write the following:

"Dear Randall:

"I am herewith returning the P. O. order for fifteen dollars. I excuse your insolent interference in my affairs on the score that you have not been informed that Cynthia is my wife. She has a claim on all that is mine the moment she is ready to assume the duties that belong to her.

"Since you know the true state of affairs, you will see the impropriety of acting as go-between where my wife and myself are concerned. Should you, however, disregard this hint, and repeat your offense, I will drop everything here, take the first train north, and give you the damnedest licking of your life.

"Kind regards to your mother,

"Ross Armitage."

CHAPTER XXII

AN INDISCRETION

It was a sunny Saturday in September and Cynthia and Susan were walking swiftly along a street made familiar by nearly a year of daily passing and repassing. Cynthia was on her way to work, and Susan was accompanying her as far as the market, where she planned to lay in the week-end supplies. Susan did not approve of Cynthia's tactics in marketing. She herself loved to haggle over the price, to poke and sniff and abuse the provisions displayed, mistaking like some older and wiser folk, the attitude of universal fault-finding for an indication of peculiar discernment.

Though Susan could have appropriated the sentiment of a perennially popular song, to the effect that of all the days in the week, she dearly loved but one day—that of course, being the twenty-four hours intervening between Saturday and Monday—yet as far as prosaic Saturday was concerned, her mood was more than tolerant. Susan scrubbed and cooked, washed and ironed and enjoyed the day only second to that in which she was sure of Cynthia's constant companionship. Sunday had one enormous advan-

tage however, for on Sunday Cynthia never insisted on her studying her lessons, while the cheerfulness of Saturday was likely to be clouded by pertinent inquiries as to her history or geography.

Susan's year had been anything but joyful. Cynthia's greed for understanding, her passion for beauty were not shared by her younger sister. Susan hated school as whole-heartedly as Cynthia had hated the drudgery of her life on the farm. She loathed her class mates, so much younger than herself, and so smugly complacent over their superior knowledge. She found the confinement of the school-room more irksome than the hardest toil. Susan's teacher, a rather conventional woman who used ponderous sarcasm as a spur for the backward, would have been horrified could she have guessed the extent of her unpopularity with the oldest and least promising of her pupils. At the same time the year had wrought a marked improvement in Susan. Her table manners under Cynthia's daily admonitions, had gradually been modified till they no longer challenged the fascinated attention of the beholder. Her personal appearance had altered for the better, thanks to the same watchful oversight. But Susan was Susan still, an embodied demonstration of the impossibility of making silk purses from anything but silk.

At the market Susan bade her sister goodbye,

with a jaunty wave of her hand, and entered joyfully on her periodic wrangle with the butcher, in the course of which she blithely insulted him, first as to the quality of his goods, and secondly on the prices charged for the same. She had been dimly aware that just as she had entered the shop, a large touring car had swept up to the curb, and when she emerged after half an hour of exultant battling, the car was still there. A smart young woman, her hands thrust negligently into the pockets of a loose coat, was strolling back and forth before the market entrance, her manner implying absolute indifference to the peevish criticisms, voiced by the occupants of the car, her late companions.

As Susan appeared, the young woman walked directly up to her. "Excuse me," she said, "but do you happen to know the name of the girl you were walking with half an hour ago?"

The question appealed to Susan's sense of humor, always in unstable equilibrium on the days she was out of school. She laughed with abandon, throwing back her head and squeezing her eyes tightly together, as if to extract the full flavor of the joke. "She wonders if I know Kizzie's name," she apostrophized the surrounding atmosphere.

"Kizzie!"

"Well, it's really Keziah—"

"Oh!" Susan's interrogator half turned toward

the waiting car while Susan, unhurried finished the sentence—"Ayres."

"Ayres! Her name is Ayres?" Again the young woman whirled upon her. Country-bred Susan was reminded of a hunting dog that has lost the scent, and then after a little, picks it up again.

Susan's slow brain was beginning to grasp the situation. "Maybe you're one of the folks who knew her when she ran away the first time. She used to call herself Cynthia, then."

"And do you know where she lives?"

Again Susan's amusement delayed her reply. "Why," she gasped when she had sufficiently recovered breath to explain, "we live together. She's my sister."

"Your sister?"

Susan proved herself a good sport by laughing with undiminished amusement at the not entirely complimentary implication of the incredulous exclamation. "Hardly anybody can believe it," she explained serenely. "I tell Kizzie she got the beauty of the family and I got the brains." She offered as an amendment, "Course that's just my way of having a little fun with Kizzie. She's as smart as greased lightning and I'm a regular bone-head."

"May I walk on with you, please? I'd like to have a talk with you."

"Sure!" agreed Susan, beaming. "I like most

anybody's company better than my own." She was flattered by the friendly advances of this young woman who impressed her as extremely good looking. Not like Kizzie, of course. There were not many in Kizzie's class. But there were some things about her interlocutor that took the eye.

The young woman addressed herself to her attentive friends. "You needn't wait for me."

"Now Anne Rossiter," cried an acrimonious feminine voice, "if you've got us up at this unearthly hour, and are going to keep us hanging around—"

"I said you needn't wait. I'll take the train when I'm ready, and meet you tonight at the Beaumont."

"Nonsense!" the man at the wheel spoke with authority. "We'll go back to the Continental and wait for you there."

"I was so tired this morning," lamented the voice that had spoken before. "It didn't seem as if I could get up, but Anne Rossiter insisted that we ought to have an early start."

"How long are you likely to be?" asked another feminine voice, with a note of resignation.

"Heaven knows! Fifteen minutes or fifteen hours. As far as I'm concerned, I don't care whether you wait for me or not."

"We'll be at the Continental," said the man at

"'I DON'T CARE WHETHER YOU WAIT FOR ME OR NOT.'"

the wheel in a tone that ended the discussion, and the car slid away.

Susan had been listening intently. "We stayed at that hotel, once," she volunteered, as her new acquaintance joined her. The fact she had mentioned impressed her as a bond of sympathy. Moreover it seemed well for this attractive young woman, named Anne Rossiter, to understand at the outset that other people were not unfamiliar with the adjuncts of luxury.

"Oh, you did!" Anne's smile was an invitation to fullest confidence. "You and your sister, I suppose."

"Yes, us two and Ross. He—well, he was a young man we knew."

"Indeed!"

Susan's face underwent a peculiar contortion. She was not so unsophisticated as to fail to realize that her statement was capable of misconstruction. Yet she could hardly explain without mentioning something which Kizzie had charged her never to divulge under any circumstances. She stole a look at her companion and was convinced by her expression that in this case she would be justified in departing from the letter of her sister's instructions. It would never do to allow this agreeable stranger to jump to a wrong conclusion regarding Kizzie.

"The way we happened to do it," she said confidentially, "he was her husband at the time."

"How interesting. When you say 'at the time,' I suppose you mean he isn't her husband now."

"I don't know." The question had long been a burning one with Susan. She had longed to discuss it with Kizzie, but any mention of Ross or of the happenings of that delirious journey, brought such a terrible look into Kizzie's eyes that Susan had long before determined to keep her perplexities to herself. It occurred to her that since the cat was out of the bag, so to speak, she might as well secure any enlightenment possible from this new acquaintance.

"I've wondered about that,"she confided. "And I can't ask Kizzie, for she goes up in the air if I say a word about him. But if you get married, and then right away make up your mind that it's all a mistake, are you married, or aren't you?"

"I'm afraid you're married. But it's a great pity, especially if one discovers immediately that it has been a mistake."

"Well, she didn't say that exactly. But every time I waked up in the night, she was sitting there writing a letter. She never went to bed at all. And she made me get up awful early and she said we were never going to see Ross again. And that was the

very next morning after we'd been to the minister's and got married."

"Oh, she was married at the minister's, was she? Were you there?"

"Well, I guess I was. I wanted to stand up with Kizzie, but she said she didn't think folks had bridesmaids when they got married at the minister's. She didn't have a white dress, either. Ross said she could if she wanted one. I'd want a white dress if I was going to get married, wouldn't you?"

"A white dress, and at least six bridesmaids. But as long as it was your sister who was being married, it was right to have it just as she wanted it."

Susan continued to expand under the genial interest of the friendly Miss Rossiter. "They wished her joy, the minister and his wife did, but she didn't get much joy out of it. Folks that didn't know would think she was pretty chipper now. Kizzie is the kind that does her crying at night."

"He must have done something to offend her very much," hazarded Miss Rossiter.

"Ross!" Susan shouted the name in a manner expressing complete disagreement. "Why, he was just dippy about her. All she had to do was to say she wanted something, and he'd 'a' got it for her, if it had bust him."

"Why should she have left him, then?"

"Search me." Susan shook her head. "Kizzie ain't like me," she theorized, rather unnecessarily. "Sometimes it looks as if she did things just because she didn't want to."

The two had walked briskly under the stimulus of interesting conversation, and now Susan halted. "This is where we live," she explained with a comprehensive gesture toward the dingy brick building. "Won't you come in?"

Anne made a pretense of hesitation. "I'm afraid it's hardly convenient to have a caller so early in the day."

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that. Of course I haven't done the work this morning, but I can wash up the dishes and talk at the same time."

"If you're sure it won't be a bother, I'd love to come in."

Susan led the way upstairs, radiating complacency. In less than a year, Cynthia's salary had been twice raised, and the increased affluence of the sisters manifested itself in what Susan referred to as "our flat." A less optimistic tenant might have regarded it as a small room with two closets adjoining, the larger closet serving as a bed room, the smaller dignified by the name of kitchenette. Situated on the third floor where the heat climbed reluctantly in winter, while the rays of the sun did merciless execution in summer, at this time of the year it

presented a happy medium in temperature. But at all seasons, the odors of the cooking below-stairs mounted as if on wings, perfuming the halls with a perennial odor of onions in all styles, while cabbage cooked in the basement kitchen was little short of a tragedy for the occupants of the third-floor rear apartment.

Susan gave her caller a chair, apologizing for the disorder of the room. "Those papers are Kizzie's. She was doing some writing last night when I was studying. Kizzie's crazy about school. I wish she wasn't. I hate it."

With entire disregard for the impatience of the automobile party waiting at the Continental, Anne prolonged her call till she had extracted from Susan every particle of information which could serve her turn. Toward the end of her stay, Susan began to realize the extent of her confidences and became uneasy.

"If you see Kizzie," she insinuated gently, "I guess you'd better not say anything—well, about what I've told you. Kizzie gets so upset—."

"When do you expect your sister home?"

"Not before two o'clock anyway. Sometimes on Saturdays she gets off early. That depends on how much work she has to do."

"It's only half past eleven and I mustn't stay any longer. I expect my friends will be very disagree-

able, as it is. So the sensible thing is not to say a word about my having been here."

Susan's long-drawn breath indicated relief. "I didn't know but you'd want to leave some message for her."

"Oh, that's not necessary. You see I never knew your sister very well, but I'm glad to find her so pleasantly situated. If I ever come again, she can introduce us, and we won't say a word about having met before."

Susan shrieked delightedly. The course Miss Rossiter suggested would be a joke on Kizzie, and moreover it was the way of safety. Susan had the preference for truth that inheres in all ordinarily decent people, but she also knew from sad experience, how the tangled web woven by falsehood, becomes a snare for unwary feet. If she told Kizzie of her call from the fascinating Miss Rossiter, Kizzie would ask at once, "How long did she stay?" On learning that the visit had extended over two hours, Kizzie's next question would be, "What did you talk about all that time?" And then into Kizzie's eyes would come the look which meant she would not drop the subject till she knew all that Susan herself knew. No, it was vastly better to keep her in the dark.

The parting of the two was almost affectionate. Susan shook her new friend's hand with an up-and-

down vehemence she had acquired in working the pump-handle back on the farm. "I've just enjoyed this talk with you," she said. "You don't know how tired I get of those smarty kids at school. Of course I can't get tired of Kizzie, but then a person likes a change sometimes, no matter how nice a thing is. I've heard of folks that got tired of ice cream."

Miss Rossiter was not to be outdone in courtesy. She asserted, with apparent sincerity, that she had seldom enjoyed a morning more. Then after a second hand-shake they parted, Anne relieving her hostess' anxiety by declaring herself quite capable of finding her way back to the Continental without a guide.

Cynthia was rather late for Saturday afternoon. When she returned, the flat was in immaculate order, the dinner stew was filling the room with savory odors, and Susan was working her arithmetic examples for Monday. To a suspicious nature this occupation would have been in itself sufficient proof of previous misconduct, but Cynthia's nature was not suspicious. Whenever, for reasons of her own, Susan counterfeited interest in her studies, Cynthia always showed an angelic readiness to believe that at last her awakening had come.

It was rather hard on Susan that after passing through the crisis of Cynthia's return without

arousing suspicions, she should later have come near self-betrayal. They attended a movie, after supper, that little treat being a regular Saturday feature of those weeks when Susan's school record had not been too deplorable. They were home again an hour before bed time, and while Susan darned stockings, lost in a reverie she would not for the world have shared with her sister, Cynthia went restlessly about the small living room, engaged in a quest for something she did not find.

"Susan," she appealed at length, "What did you do with those papers I was using last evening?"

"Put them in the table drawer."

"I've looked there. I want the paper with the writing on it."

"It's got to be in the table drawer, because there ain't—isn't I mean—nowhere else for it to be."

But all the papers in the table drawer were blank. Susan satisfied herself on that point, and made a horrible grimace, indicating uncertainty. "I wonder—"

"What, Susan?"

Thanks to a mental somersault, Susan had stopped in time. "I wonder if I thought that paper wasn't any good, and put it out with the trash. If t'was all marked up, it couldn't have looked like much. I—I'm sorry, Kizzie. Do you mind awfully?"

That night after the lights were out, Susan quieted her restive conscience by repeatedly asserting that she had not told a lie. It was ridiculous to suppose that Miss Rossiter would have carried away the paper on which Kizzie had been scribbling the previous evening. It was far more probable that in a fit of absent-mindedness she herself had destroyed it. Susan mentally congratulated herself on her good luck in making up a story on the spur of the moment, and by sheer accident hitting on the truth.

CHAPTER XXIII

A SCRAP OF PAPER

Armitage had not seen Anne since the first of July, and was not anticipating that pleasure for at least another month, when a special messenger brought him her note. It was written with an effect of haste, the words looped together, as if in their hurry they had run into one another.

"Dear Ross:—

"I'm tired of sunburn and dust and punctured tires and I've cut out the automobile trip. I must see you as soon as possible. Send me word by bearer if you can come tonight.

"Anne."

Armitage scrawled a line promising to be with her by half past eight. He kept his appointment to the minute, and with a sense of anticipation he had not felt for many a month.

The room where Anne received him was still shrouded in ghostly coverings, donned as a protection against the dust of summer, but Anne had not dressed to match the room. He broke off in his greetings to stare at her.

"Good Lord, Anne! I'm not deserving of such gorgeousness. Do you expect someone else, or is it all for me?"

"For you, if you like it."

"Like's too mild a word, I adore it. Anne—I never saw you so beautiful."

She leaned back in her chair, contemplating him with inscrutable eyes. Though it had been so long since they had seen each other, she seemed to have little to say. She left him to steer the talk, and either because this is seldom the man's responsibility in modern society, or for some less obvious reason, his ideas were few and disconnected, and the conversation frequently lapsed. Again and again he found himself staring at her amid a silence throbbingly vital.

With something like relief he at length recalled the peremptory tone of her summons. "Oh, Anne, what was it you wanted to see me about?"

She waited till he looked at her, puzzled by her silence, and then continued to look, his eyes held captive by the deliberate provocation of her smile. "I wanted to see you," she replied. "Just that. No 'abouts' in the case."

"It's mutual, I assure you. I only thought from something in your note—"

She did not offer to help him out, and feeling somewhat at a loss, he fell back on a cigarette. As

he fumbled in his pockets, she arose. "Wait," she murmured. "Here are matches."

His hand was on his match box, but he withdrew it empty. She had been sitting at a rather formal distance, but now she crossed the room. With something in her manner that gave the trivial act an effect of premeditation, she seated herself on the broad arm of his chair. She scratched the match on the sole of her satin slipper, and leaned across him to hold it at a convenient nearness. The flickering light played about the curves of her white bosom, and was reflected luridly in her pale eyes. He found himself intensely conscious of her proximity, of the delicate fragrance emanating from her person, of her slimness and whiteness and challenging femininity. Uneasily he lowered his eyes to the level of her extended hand. Her jade bracelet had slipped down to her wrist, the greener by contrast to the blue of the branching veins.

"You haven't told me anything about your summer. Was White Sulphur—"

Her movement was pantherine in its swift, noiseless recoil. He broke off, conscious that he had offended her, yet not understanding why. His troubled eyes followed her to the centre of the room where she stood under the blaze of the chandelier, palpitating, angry, alluring. Her face was vivid with color, her eyes flame. No son of Adam

could have failed to understand, even had she not drawled mockingly, "Ross, if you could only see yourself with that smug Sir Galahad expression—"

His face was stern as he went to her. He laid his hand on her bare quivering arm, and she jerked away. "Don't touch me!"

His answer was to seize her firmly by both arms and draw her to him. If the truth be told, he felt at the moment little enough like a Galahad.

"Listen, Anne, dear. Could you make the best of as bad a bargain as I would be?"

"Ross Armitage, if you dare make love to me because you're sorry for me, I—I'll kill you."

He felt suddenly at ease. "Why, you little fool," he laughed, and kissed her. In an instant all her fierce animosity was dissipated. She crushed herself against him, flinging a satin arm about his neck. For a moment—but a moment only—Cynthia was forgotten.

He came to himself with a rebound that carried him to the depths of self-contempt. Yet he knew himself committed. The woman he loved had deserted him. The woman who loved him had been true in spite of neglect and indifference. He felt abashed before the quality of her passion, humbled, shamed by the knowledge that though he gave her all he had to give, it was little beside what she was ready to return.

"Anne dear, I suppose mother told you of my unfortunate imbroglio. Technically I'm a married man. There'll have to be some legal process, nothing very complicated I imagine, before I'm free to marry." He added with a note of distaste, "I'm sorry that you should be subjected to anything of this sort on my account."

She put her cheek against his. The arm about his neck tightened.

"You're not the first man, Ross, to be the victim of an adventuress."

His start was unpremeditated, but it had the effect of jerking him free. He stood at arms' length from Anne, though her hand rested upon his shoulder.

"Listen, dear. I don't expect you and mother to take my view of it, but I must ask you never to refer to that affair. I—I can't hear her blamed."

Anne laughed gaily. "That's the advantage she has gained by not really being your wife. She's a sort of idealized, elusive personality, above praise or blame. Now you'll find fault with me fast enough, Ross, when we're married."

"I hope not."

"Oh but of course you will. You'll be a regular husband and scowl when my bills come in, and tell me not to put on so much rouge. Let's go and sit on the Davenport where you can hold my hand. But

perhaps that doesn't appeal to you as a fascinating indoor sport."

He followed her silently, took her hand and kissed it. "It's a very dear hand," he said, "and I love to hold it. It has given me something beyond price."

The words were all she could have wished, but they were spoken with an incongruous gravity. She glanced at him obliquely, and put her free hand against his cheek.

"Don't look so solemn, Ross. It isn't as if I were a flapper with some fanciful notion about first love. I know how the little passions blaze up and burn themselves out. I've had my own fancies, for that matter. It's nothing to me that once you loved Cynthia, so that it's over."

His face contracted. While he realized her generous intentions, her fingers seemed probing a festering wound. And he perceived too, that Anne was under a misapprehension. At all costs she must be set right.

"Listen, Anne dear," he said. "I love you honestly. I'm bound to you by every tie of tenderness and gratitude. And I shall be faithful to you, Anne, even—even in my thinking. But we mustn't go into this without a full understanding. My love for Cynthia wasn't a little passion that burnt itself out. It's something I shall have to fight, God knows

how long. It wouldn't be fair to let you marry me and not know."

There was something ominous in the quality of her silence. He was afraid to look at her lest he should see that he had wounded her too deeply. It was a relief to have her lean toward him and kiss him swiftly. He gave her back her kiss with an ardor born of that relief.

"Ross!" She freed herself from his embrace and rose. "I've a poem I want to read you."

"A poem!" He echoed her words in surprise.

"If I'm going to marry a highbrow, I must cultivate highbrow tastes,—poetry included."

"Highbrow!" His tone was contemptuous. "You seem to get a great deal of satisfaction out of calling me names tonight."

She laughed at him over a dazzling shoulder, and went into an adjoining room. On her return he was surprised to see she carried a sheet of foolscap, covered with closely written lines in pencil. "Anne," he exclaimed, "you don't mean you've turned poet."

She shook her head. "Oh no! Love hasn't developed unsuspected talents in me. This was written by a woman I know, and I'd like your candid opinion of it. So please don't let your thoughts wander." She did not resume her place beside him, but drew a chair under the chandelier and seated herself in its glare. There was some irridescent stuff on the

dress she wore, and in the light she seemed all sparkle and shimmer. Again his pulses quickened.

Her voice was husky when she spoke again, so he heard her with difficulty. "The title is—'The Message.'"

"'The Message,'" he repeated. "But wait, Anne. If you're going to look so bewitching, I'm not sure I'll be able to listen with proper attention."

She flashed a smile at him. "If you're bored—tell me," she countered, and after a moment's silence began to read. A trenchant quality had come into her voice, a poignant depth strange to him. It made him think of the more than human cry of a violin.

"A slender little hand, too weak by much
To grapple with occasion and prevail.
Fit for the ministry of soothing touch,
But for achievement all too slight and frail.
Yet can I not contemn it, since that day
When throbbing with a happiness unknown,
Enshrined, enthroned and glorified it lay,
Clasped fast in both your own."

Armitage was aware that he had caught his breath. So still was the room that the sound was distinctly audible, and Anne looked up. "Bored?" The flame in her eyes had changed to green. It flickered wickedly.

"Go—go on."

"A pensive little face, too wan and white
For any of the charms that lovers prize.
No mounting blushes, ravishing the sight,
No golden coronet, nor azure eyes.
Yet I have known the ecstasy of pride
When once you bent to kiss my braided hair.
To my heart's centre more than satisfied.
So that you found me fair."

Again the reader paused and her eyes flashed their challenge. But Armitage did not see. His head was bowed, his body tense, and as Anne ceased, the sound of his hard breathing broke the silence. Though he had not moved since she began, he breathed like a spent runner.

"A useless little life, by pain beset,
Haunted by yearnings for things out of reach,
Shadowed by failure, troubled by regret,
Futile in effort, faltering in speech.
Yet since you claimed this same poor life as yours,
Giving most richly when you stooped to take,
How can I fail, while memory endures,
To love it for your sake."

"Cynthia!"

The cry was under his breath, but it rent the hush of the room like a shriek. Anne let the paper fall. Armitage had covered his face with his hands. His tall frame was shaken by sobs. She went softly to him, seated herself by his side, and laid her hand on his bowed head. "Poor old Ross."

He choked out his apologies. "Anne, I know I'm behaving abominably, but—but you took me by surprise. That wasn't a square deal, Anne?"

Her hand slid down to his neck. "Put your head on my lap and cry there. No, don't look up. I'd rather you kept on crying a little longer. You're ready to stand by your promise to me even now, aren't you, old dear?"

"Anne, of course, this makes no difference—"

"Wait, Ross. Wait! It makes a difference to me. I know when I'm beaten. You see I've done my damnedest tonight, all the tricks in the wanton's bag—"

"Good God, Anne!"

"That's what it was, Ross. I made myself as alluring as I could with what I had. I played the vamp with my bare skin and make-up and amorous glances. Don't think I'm scrupulous. You were hers, but I meant to get you by fair means or foul. And I could trick your senses—for a minute. I could have served as a drug for a season. But then a scrap of paper—O, it doesn't do to underestimate a scrap of paper."

"Anne, if you think—"

"I don't think, Ross, I know. I've lost and now it's up to me to show myself a good sport. Don't blame yourself, you poor innocent. Men like you—men of honor—stand no chance against us when

we're unscrupulous. I could have married you—I could marry you now in spite of yourself, but that isn't what I want. Why did you let her run away, Ross?"

"She was her own mistress. I don't want to hold any woman against her will any more than you—"

"But she loves you, you poor fool. And while you're growing hard and old before your time, she lies crying night after night. What was the trouble? Some silly scruple?"

"I—I don't quite know. She said in her letter that she had wronged me, and that to go on with it, would only make it worse."

"And you let yourself be beaten without putting up a fight. You had only to follow her and take her in your arms, and she was yours—yours. I was at her rooms yesterday—"

"Anne!"

"I pumped the little sister dry. I will say with all modesty, Ross, that you might have done better. I shouldn't have embarrassed you with outlandish in-laws like Susan."

"Did you see her?"

Anne gave the correct interpretation to the pronoun. "Just a glimpse of her as she passed on the street. Then I walked home with little sister, and when she was out of the room, I stole Cynthia's poem—The Message—her message to you. It's

there on the floor, Ross, if you want it, and her address is written down in the corner."

He sprang for the crumpled paper, smoothed it out with a hand that shook uncontrollably, then turned toward his observant hostess. "Anne, I don't know what to say. I feel such a mixture of a blackguard and a lucky devil—"

"You're anything but a blackguard, Ross, and time will show whether you're lucky or not. But you have been a coward. She's your wife. Take her." Anne rose as she spoke, and came toward him. "Goodbye," she said, and looked him in the eyes.

Their parting kiss was strangely passionless, as if they had been two children saying goodnight. And when he had kissed her lips, he bowed his head and kissed her hands.

"Anne!" His color came and went as he tried to keep his conflicting emotions within bounds. "It seems mawkish to talk of gratitude and affection, but I'll never forget this, Anne. If the friendship of a life time—"

"Oh, go to the deuce," cried Anne laughing. "Run along—Shoo!" She pushed him toward the door, and he obeyed awkwardly, torn between compunction and an intoxicating anticipation. He looked back and saw her a brilliant, scintillating figure, one hand upraised in a gesture of farewell,

her lips wearing a curiously fixed smile. He could not know that she had set her teeth hard on the tremulous lower lip to hold it steady. After the door had closed behind him, she took her handkerchief and wiped away a little drop of blood.

CHAPTER XXIV

SUSAN PLAYS TRUANT

At nine o'clock that Monday morning, Susan had been triumphant. By ten she was defiant, and at eleven, contrite. Noon found her crushed beneath a consciousness of culpability for which she could plead no extenuating circumstance.

Susan had played truant. Like most crimes it had been unpremeditated. At half past eight she had reminded herself that it was time to get ready for school, and then had yielded to cheerless anticipations of the prospect ahead. She did not know her lessons. The "smarty kids" would contemplate her floundering efforts to convince Miss Goss to the contrary, with derisive superiority. Miss Goss would counterfeit, though unconvincingly, surprise at Susan's lack of preparation. She would be kept after school.

At a quarter to nine she recognized that another dereliction was likely to be charged up against her. There was now strong likelihood that she would be late, and in the school category, tardiness was the most heinous of offenses. Her stupidity was her

own affair, but to be late to school lowered the average of the room's punctuality. This transgression contaminated the most irreproachable of her schoolmates. Not only would Miss Goss' welcome indicate a sense of outrage, but every face turned in her direction would wear a scowl.

Then without warning, Susan conceived the idea of playing truant, and the audacity of the scheme instantly appealed to her. To do as she pleased for an entire day, mentally to bid Miss Goss go hang, was a prospect infinitely alluring. Susan looked at the little clock, then seated herself deliberately, and picked up a newspaper of the previous week. By the time she had finished the Daily Story, the hands of the clock were on the stroke of nine and the thing was accomplished.

Susan's gleeful mood lasted the better part of an hour, but by ten the second phase was in control. She fell to work cleaning the kitchenette, finding relief in the strenuous and unnecessary toil. Passionately she defied Miss Goss, and her mutinous spirit carried her to the point of revolting against Cynthia's gentle authority. She would be sixteen on her next birthday, old enough to have a mind of her own, old enough to do as she pleased about an education. And from now on, she meant to have her own way. Kizzie had run away from home because she didn't like it, and yet she insisted that

Susan should keep on going to school, although she hated it. All of which was manifestly unfair.

But by eleven her self-assertion had given place to remorse. She was a worthless and wicked girl, a monster of selfishness, an ingrate. Without appreciating the extent of her sister's sacrifice, she realized vaguely that Cynthia was putting her welfare above everything else, and this certainty sharpened her compunction. It was bad enough to disappoint Kizzie by being a bone-head, though this was beyond her power to alter. But she could at least be in her place when school opened. If Miss Goss' sarcasm and the priggishness of her schoolmates were frequently galling, common decency demanded that she put up with them for Kizzie's sake.

When Susan's penitence took the form of sitting down to work examples in bank discount, the pendulum had swung as far as possible in the direction of contrition. Noon found her struggling gamely to solve the riddles, without ever, by any chance, reaching a correct solution. Slow tears trickled down her cheeks and made queer blisters on the paper. In a few hours Kizzie would be coming home, and it would be necessary for Susan to reveal her own baseness. She almost felt that death would be preferable.

A little after twelve there was a knock at the door. Susan deposited her paraphernalia on the

floor, searched wildly for her handkerchief, and then in default of that useful article, made a shift with her gingham apron. And having thus rendered herself presentable, she went reluctantly to answer the summons.

Callers were not frequent at the third floor rear apartment. At the sight of a man's figure in the hall, a horrible certainty took possession of Susan. The truant officer! The door slammed shut, but as her trembling fingers fumbled with the key, a voice outside spoke her name, "Why, Susan!"

It was over-familiar for a truant officer. Moreover there was a suggestion of pleasure in the exclamation, inconsistent with the dignity of so awe-inspiring an official. Her lips at the key-hole, Susan called fearfully, "Who are you?"

"Open the door and you'll find out."

"Tell me your name first."

There was laughter in the hall. "I'll be durned," said a familiar voice, "if I don't believe you're scared. You little 'fraid-cat, I'm no hold-up man."

"Oh I'm not afraid of hold-up men. I thought maybe—" The key turned slowly, the door was opened a crack, and Susan peered into a highly scented corridor, at the moment redolent of second-floor turnips. Then she flung the door wide and shrieked, "Randall! Randall!"

It was small wonder that Randall was dazed by

the exuberance of her welcome. Susan did not kiss him for the conclusive reason that the top of her head only reached the protruding and admonitory point of his stick-pin. But she flung her arms about that part of his anatomy accessible, and hugged him frantically, her face buried against the pit of his stomach. All the loneliness of that endless year, all her longing for familiar things, country air, bird song, homely tasks, friendly faces, abundant room, found expression in that frenzied embrace. Randall's head spun on his shoulders.

Susan's hospitable instincts came to the aid of the bewildered visitor. She released him, only to seize his arm. "Come in. Come in! O, Randall, I'm so glad to see you." She began to laugh a trifle hysterically. "What do you s'pose I thought you was—the truant officer."

"The truant officer?"

"Yes, I played truant today, and I don't know what Kizzie will say. She's crazy about having me get an education and I hate it."

"Well, I'll be durned!"

"Yes, isn't it?" Susan cried. Instinct told her that the critical note in Randall's exclamation was not horror for the delinquency to which she had acknowledged, but surprise at Kizzie's unreasonableness. She pulled up the best chair for him, removed her apron and then as he seated himself, took her

stand before him, gazing at him with admiration. "Oh Randall, you look perfectly grand."

Randall's blush was due in part to embarrassment, in part to gratified pride. When one is attired in a brand-new suit, with a cravat one has been assured by no less an authority than the proprietor of Balls' General Store is "swagger," and in addition is wearing a collar whose height and stiffness are productive of acute agony, it is gratifying to have one's efforts recognized. "You look pretty fine yourself, Susan," he said appreciatively.

"Oh, this is my school dress. You ought to see me in my best one. And besides I've been crying and my nose is red. I'll look better after a while. How's everybody, Randall?"

Randall looked at her and grinned. "Heard anything from home lately?"

"We don't never hear except when you write."

"Haven't got anybody's wedding cards, then?"

"Who?" shrieked Susan.

"Give you three guesses."

"Letty Haylittle?"

"No."

"That Duckel girl?"

"No. You ain't even warm."

"Old man Bantom?"

"You're getting warmer, but you're way off yet, Susan. You've got a step-mother."

Susan staggered. "Randall Baird, you're fooling. There ain't a woman crazy enough—"

"I don't know whether he'd 'a found anybody 'round home who'd 'a had him. Nobody knows where this woman came from, but they say he got her through a matrimonial agency. And it looks to me, Sue, as if she was the kind that would give him back as good as he gave."

"Nobody could do that with pa. No woman, anyhow."

"Maybe not. But she'll do her best. She's not the meek kind."

Susan drew a long breath.

"I don't know but I'm glad of it. I've always been kind of afraid that he'd find me and take me back home. He couldn't meddle with Kizzie, but I'm not sixteen yet. Now he won't want me." She dismissed the unprofitable theme for others more appealing. "How's your mother feeling, Randall?"

"Well, mother's only so-so. She gets tired awful easy nowadays. We're trying to get her a hired girl, and dad went up to see the Drapers—you know the Drapers who live out toward the Falls. The youngest girl would have come, and maybe we'll get her yet, but what do you think she wants—five dollars a week!"

Susan was staring at him with curious intentness.

"O, Randall, that Mary Draper ain't any older than I am."

"I know it and she's not half as handy about the house. Think of her asking five dollars. But mother's got to have somebody—"

Susan had placed a chair for herself conveniently near that occupied by her guest. Her hand shot out and seized his arm. "Randall!"

"Well, what is it?"

"What do you fool with that Draper girl for? Why don't you take me?"

"You, Susan!"

"Yes, me." Her hand still clutched his sleeve and he felt that she was trembling. "I don't want pay, not a cent. If your mother'll give me some of her old duds, I'll fix 'em over and get along. And I'll work, oh Randall, you know how I can work—"

"Why, Susan, I didn't suppose Kizzie—"

She dropped his arm and flung herself back in her chair. Her stormy emotions found expression in strange grimaces.

"She doesn't—she wouldn't— She wants me to stay in school and study things I hate, and have them kids laughing at me and Miss Goss saying she's surprised, when it's just what she expected all the time. And you're on her side. Everybody's on her side and against me."

"I'm not against you, Susie."

"Yes you are, too. Everybody's against me." She broke into sobs which only grew more explosive under Randall's efforts at consolation. His sympathy betrayed itself at length into something perilously near *lese-majesty.*

"I don't wonder you hate to be sent back to school, Susie. Kizzie oughtn't to make you do it, if you don't want to go."

He was holding her left hand while with the right she pressed to her eyes the handkerchief he had thoughtfully loaned her. At the unexpected criticism of Cynthia, Susan dropped the handkerchief, gazing at him through red and eager eyes. With a start and blush, Randall released her hand.

"Oh, Randall, take me home with you. I'll work my fingers off for your mother. She'll be glad to have me, Randall. She always liked me, and when Kizzie finds out—"

He interrupted her, horror in his voice, "You don't mean to say that you're thinking of running away."

The reaction from expectancy roused Susan to fury. She turned upon him a look of passionate resentment.

"Oh, no, of course not. Kizzie can run away and it's all right. She can run away twice, first from her father and mother, and then from her husband, and you haven't a word to say. But when I

want to run away from her, you act as if I was meaner than the old scratch."

"I didn't think that, Susie. I just thought if you left Kizzie, she'd be lonely."

"If she's lonely, she'd better go and live with her husband." Susan was astonished at the heretical sentiments that were passing her lips and which did not represent her feelings, so much as her antagonism to what she imagined Randall felt

"I don't blame her for running away from her husband if she don't like him."

"Don't like him!" Susan laughed shrilly. "But she does like him. She's crazy about him. Lots of times when I wake up in the night, she's crying. Sometimes she gets up and sets by the window. And you can tell she's thinking about him."

"Doggone it!" Randall's eyes moistened at Susan's vivid picture. "But why did she do it, then?"

"I don't know why she did it, but I know it wasn't because she'd stopped liking him. I thought maybe she found out that she liked you better, you know, but when I asked her she was as mad as she could be. She wanted to know how I dared."

Randall winced visibly and Susan checked herself. She realized that she had proved her point at too great a cost. Her aggressiveness disappeared, swallowed up by compunction.

"Say, Randall," she stammered. "I hadn't ought to have said that. I—that was mean of me."

"That's all right, Susie. It don't tell me much more than I knew. I guess after she went down to the city, I never had a chance. I guess it would have been just the same if there hadn't been any such fellow as Armitage."

Susan essayed comfort. "She never saw you dressed up this way."

"No, but that wouldn't make any difference. I guess she'd like him just the same if he was in overalls and barefoot."

Randall rose and began to pace the floor, his mind busy with the problems of Kizzie's contradictoriness, loving a man, yet abandoning him. He was not lacking in shrewdness, and perhaps the proximity of Susan's squat little figure helped him in finding a solution that met the requirements of the case. What would have happened if after she had married this city fellow, Kizzie had found him unwilling to be responsible for Susan? Why—exactly what had happened. Kizzie would not leave her own flesh and blood in the lurch.

"If she'd married me, I'd have given 'em all house-room," thought Randall. "The old man himself, if she'd said the word, or the devil either." His anger burned hot against Armitage for the caddishness with which he credited him. He had run away with

both girls, to make sure of one and then when he had accomplished his end, he had been ready to throw Susan over. Randall would have liked to stand up and tell him what he thought of him and his conduct. Susan wasn't like Kizzie to be sure, but she was a nice little thing, not bad looking in her serge dress, nobody to be ashamed of.

His restless pacing slowed materially each time he approached Susan's chair, as if he had been an errant comet, all but irresistibly attracted by the heavenly body in such close proximity. And presently the attraction proved too much for his momentum, and he came to a halt before her.

"Listen, Susie, was you in earnest when you said you'd go back with me?"

She stared up at him in dazed silence, unable to believe her ears. Then her mingled doubt and ecstasy found vent in a stifled cry, "Randall, you're fooling."

"I'll have to count up my money and see if I've got enough for both of our fares. I didn't expect to go back tonight, so I brought along some extra. We'll see."

Susan's head was better for practical than theoretical problems. She made sorry work of bank discount, but she knew how to make a dollar do full duty. It was Susan who pointed out that Randall's inadequate cash would serve if they eschewed the

luxury of berths in a sleeper and rode in the day coach. Randall hesitated.

"I don't mind it myself. I'd rather do it than go in a sleeping car, with that high-and-mighty darky offering to brush my clothes, as if I didn't know enough to make myself look decent. But I'm afraid you'll find it a little back-achy."

"I don't mind my back aching. I don't mind anything if only you'll take me with you."

It was about three o'clock when they went stealthily down the stairs. They had eaten heartily, for Randall's funds did not permit of patronizing the dining car. Each carried a bundle, for Susan was starting out as her older sister had done years before. Magnanimously she had left the straw suitcase for Kizzie. And although she had shed tears over her farewell letter, that had been only a spring shower, emptying itself and leaving the sky cloudless. Susan's heart was light, and her face reflected its blitheness in an unwonted radiance. Randall glancing in her direction as they left the house, was fairly startled. Doggone it, if the kid wasn't growing pretty.

CHAPTER XXV

"WHITHER THOU GOEST"

It had been blue Monday with Cynthia. All day the clock had proved a magnet drawing her eyes irresistibly, and at scandalously frequent intervals. Her employer had been irascible, not because her work had fallen short, but because a slump in securities had put his nerves on edge. The head book-keeper, an anemic young man with a low forehead, addressed her twice as "Sweetness." Cynthia's hand had lost none of its early cunning. She responded to the term of endearment by a glance of such frigid disdain, that the head book-keeper proved his blood actually red by a slight blush.

"No need to get on your ear, girlie. Just because I called you Sweetness, don't try to be ice-cream."

"It might save trouble if you would be good enough to call me by my name."

"What is it, then, if I'm going to call you by it? Miss K. Ayres. K stands for Katherine and Kid and Kitty and Kathleen Mavourneen and—and Kiss, by Jove."

Cynthia gave her attention to her type-writing,

scorning to honor such banalities by the annihilation of the one responsible. The head book-keeper, too, returned to his task, whistling, "Any Place Is Heaven if You Are Near," though fortunately Cynthia's musical education was not sufficiently advanced for her to appreciate the flattering implication.

It was a relief when the day was over, and she could put on her things and start for home. The street cars at that hour were packed, and as she clung to the overhead strap, swaying with the jolting of the car, and a little faint in the suffocating atmosphere, where every cubic foot of air had long before parted with its oxygen, her thoughts ran ahead to the little flat at the end of her journey, to the small, meagerly furnished rooms, that after all, stood for home.

The little room would be warm and light, she told herself. Dinner would be ready, a simple meal, but savory, and after dinner there would be the big rocking chair that creaked, and the blessed drop light, and the shabby library book, whose contents belied its cover. Cynthia's weary heart warmed at the prospect. Whatever it is given mortals to endure, the burden is not intolerable as long as the heart keeps that eager sense of home-coming.

She toiled up the two long flights of stairs at the lodging house, increasingly conscious of fatigue,

gained the third-floor landing breathless, and tried the door. It was locked. She took out her key, forgetting her weariness in perplexity. As the door swung open, no welcoming light streamed out to greet her. No appetizing odors proclaimed that the evening meal was in readiness. With a sigh Cynthia reflected that Susan's lessons must have been a sorrier failure than usual, if her teacher had detained her until this hour. She found the matches and lighted the gas. And then the flaring up of the yellow flame revealed Susan's letter, lying on the table, a huge sheet, folded once, and with the name "Kizzie" written across it diagonally.

Cynthia dropped heavily into the rocking-chair, nerving herself to read the communication. She had proved herself not lacking in courage, but for the moment she was in the grip of sheer terror. Susan's note might contain the most common-place announcement, that she had gone to the market for some supplies she had forgotten, or to the library for a book needed in her school work. Yet while some assuasive inner voice offered Cynthia these assurances, she knew better. The folded sheet enclosed a message of calamity.

She found strength finally to put out her hand and take the letter. Astounding as its news seemed, each line before she reached its end, had become an old story. In the explanation she had given herself

for steeling her heart against the claims of love, she had never been altogether candid. It had been the unconformable quality in Susan that had tipped the scale. She had put to the test her own powers of adaptation, and had recognized that these were lacking in her younger sister. In the life Ross offered her, Susan would not fit. She had wrecked her hopes for her sister's sake, and now her sister had deserted her.

The temporary bewilderment of her mood crystallized in conviction. What had happened was neither new nor strange. The mistaken sense of duty which led to the denial of the claims of the individuality was bound to result disastrously. With cruel clearness the certainty grew upon her that she could render the highest service to others, only as she was true to herself, recognizing and claiming her rights as a human being.

But this was not all. She had been false to herself, but she had also been false to the man who was more than lover, though less than husband. She had said and believed that she could give him nothing to compensate for that of which she robbed him. But in that she had dishonored him. If he had loved her as he said, her love would have been abundant compensation. With hot, dry eyes, she stared at Susan's letter. Even Susan had been unhappy. Even as far as Susan was concerned, her

sacrifice had proved futile. She looked at the paper more closely. Yes, she was not mistaken, there were traces of tears.

"Darling Darling Kizzie:

"Please don't feel bad because I'm running away. You know you ran away too, Kizzie, and I'm sure you never hated anything worse than I hate school. You'd hate it, too, Kizzie, to have sumbody always saying she was surprised when you knew it was all put on.

"Kizzie darling, pa has gone and married some fool from a mattermonial (is that the way to spell it) aguncy, and now he won't want me. So I'm going back with Randall to help his mother. Just think, Kizzie, that Mary Draper wanted five dollars a week and there ain't no sense in their fooling with her, when I'll work for nothing, though Randall says he won't have that.

"Kizzie darling, I guess you'll get along better when I'm gone. You won't have to worry because I'm stoopid and you can write potry instead of reading to me, and taking me to movies. O, Kizzie darling, if I didn't feel so bad I'd be terrably happy.

"Love from your sister

"Susan.

"P. S. Randall has a new suit and a sort of old rose shirt. He looks just grand."

Cynthia holding the letter tightly began rocking. "Just what I deserved," her thoughts ran, and the chair creaked agreement. It was like a strident voice echoing the clamorous cry of her heart: "What you deserve! Deserve! Deserve!"

"A useless little life by pain beset,
Haunted by yearnings for things out of reach."

Dreamily she heard her voice repeating the words, and wondered for a moment where they came from. Then she remembered. O, yes, it was her poem, the poem Susan had thrown away. But when she wrote it, she had written more truly than she knew.

"Haunted by yearnings for things out of reach,
Shadowed by failure, troubled by regret,
Futile in effort—"

Someone knocked at the door, a peremptory, challenging knock and Cynthia straightened herself. That controlling instinct of hers to hide her hurt at all costs, came to her aid now. By sheer force of will, she eradicated the tremor from her voice, as she would have ironed a crease from a garment. "Come in," she said.

It was a man who entered. She looked up at his tall figure and though the face was enveloped in a golden haze, she knew him. "Oh," she said, almost as she had spoken to him once before over the baby's cradle, "I thought you were the landlady."

Armitage came a step nearer. He had not sought her as a suppliant but as a dictator. "She's your wife," Anne Rossiter had said. "Take her." And that was what he had come to do. Yet something in Cynthia's manner as she sat motionless, rendered

him temporarily forgetful of his rights. He saw with consternation that her face was colorless, except for the purple splashes under her eyes. Could his coming have frightened her like this? A dull fear chastened his sense of mastery. "Cynthia, what is the matter?"

Her lips trembled apart to answer him, then closed mute. To tell him that Susan had left her might suggest that she was offering herself to him. And though she was his wife, in a sense her pride was stronger than her love. She was not capable of doing what Anne Rossiter had done, showing her heart for him to take or leave.

Her childish impulse to put Susan's tell-tale letter out of sight, inevitably attracted his attention. "What is that, Cynthia?"

"No—nothing."

It came to him that this might be another love poem, the cry of her desperate need, finding voice, for all the obstinate muteness of her sealed lips. He was eager to prove it so. He had sought her out at a sacrifice of his pride, and it would salve that hurt pride, could he demonstrate before he went any further, that she had thought of him with longing, as he had thought of her. He took the paper from her hands, none too gently, saw at a glance that he had been mistaken, and saw too, that the gods were kind. He had come just in time.

The sternness of his face had melted into a luminous gentleness as he looked down at her. She sat dressed just as she had entered the room, her little blue hat pulled down over her hair, her gloved hands lying limp in her lap. He asked a question, somewhat prosaic for the occasion. "Were you just going out?"

"No, I've just come in." She recollected herself and lifted her shaking hands to her hat, but he checked her.

"Don't take it off. We'll be going at once."

"Going?" she repeated blankly. "Where?"

"Does it matter where?"

She stared at him a moment, and her color rose. "Do you mean— O, Ross, I have a position, you know. I couldn't leave without giving notice—"

"You left me, you know, without giving notice."

Her inexorable conscience staggered under the facer. She sat appalled by the relentless truth. She who hesitated to leave a crabbed employer in the lurch, had left her husband without warning. Her exacting sense of duty, straining at every gnat, had swallowed this camel, hump and all.

It required no subtlety on his part to read her face, for her emotions were written there with copy-book plainness. He put a hand upon her shoulder, repeating his question, "Does it matter where?"

The answer of Ruth ran through her mind.

"Whither thou goest I will go—where thou lodgest, I will lodge— The Lord do so to me and more also if ought but death part me and thee." But that answer was only for her own heart. Her lips framed the single syllable, "No."

"Cynthia." He put his face down to hers. "What do you say to an old-fashioned honey-moon trip. Nobody else along, just you and me?"

"Ross," she stammered, "I thought maybe you'd come to break off altogether. I thought perhaps you didn't want me any longer."

She was in his arms before she had finished, and he groaned over her in mingled exasperation and tenderness.

"Want you! My God! Oh, why did you do it, Cynthia? Even if we live to be a hundred, we'll always be a year short. We've lost a year that belonged to us." His arms holding her in a vice-like embrace, suddenly freed her. "Go and get together what you'll need, Cynthia. I've got a week's leave."

She went obediently, but at the door turned and ran back to him, subtly changed, a pensive cloud suddenly illumined by the sunrise, a thing of mist and fire and enchantment. Beauty had flowed into her as if she were a transparent chalice, filled with love's red wine. Her eyes laughed up at him. She seemed half child, half woman, and all mystery as

she stripped her gloves from her hands, and fumbled in her blouse. From the loop of blue ribbon she drew forth, was suspended a plain gold ring.

"I couldn't wear it on my hand, Ross. I hadn't the right. But I've worn it against my heart."

He took the circlet from her, and kissed the hand she held out to him. And then his throbbing ecstasy vibrating in his unsteady voice, he said, "With this ring, I thee wed."

THE END

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